
In *Racial Innocence*, her historically focused cultural study of “scriptive things,” those “items of material culture” that allow us to “discover otherwise inaccessible evidence of past behaviours” (8), Robin Bernstein invites readers to decode the ways that artifacts like books, dolls, and advertisements hail(ed) their users into a system of ideological racialization. Conversing with “thing theorists” like Martin Heidegger, Roland Barthes, and Bill Brown (whose *A Sense of Things*, also interested in nineteenth-century American “things,” makes a surprisingly brief appearance in this book), Bernstein also channels Louis Althusser when she defines “enscription” as “interpellation through a scriptive thing that combines narrative with materiality to structure behavior” (77). The scriptive things that Bernstein showcases—no matter how one is to look at, play with, or cherish them—all insist upon one thing: sentimental narratives of childhood innocence are distributed along a colour line. From slavery until the Civil Rights Movement (and likely beyond), only certain children are scripted as innocent. Bernstein finds that, predictably, the “juvenile . . . of color” is narrated as “unfeeling” and therefore as “unchildlike” (35), rendering this figure and the subjects it represents “empty of innocence” (16). To claim a “sentimental childlike innocence” (6),
particularly following the nineteenth-century American shift whereby “[c]hildhood was . . . understood not as innocent but as innocence itself” (4), seems then to extend Jim Crow beyond the physical and into the conceptual.

Innocence Lost: Sentimental Materialism and Narratives of Childhood, Race, and Use

There is no doubt that Racial Innocence is a provocative, insightful, and bold text that demonstrates how important the field of cultural studies is and can be. Texts and topics are interwoven with poignant commentaries about race and identity in a way that insists that Bernstein’s arguments are equally relevant to scholars interested in youth narratives and cultures as well as those of us working in critical race studies. Bernstein is also able to merge literary and cultural texts with sociological and historical findings in productive ways while hinting at the contemporary relevance of both her methodology and her findings.

Bernstein begins her argument by addressing, with a degree of attentiveness perhaps not previously ever granted them, black child figures that were simultaneously “juvenile yet excluded from the exalted status of ‘child’” (35): pickaninnies. The description Bernstein offers of this figure outlines an easily recognized caricature: images of black youngsters with “exaggerated eyes and mouth[s]” devouring watermelons or finding mischief should evoke a myriad of popular culture references whose contexts are shamefully not as dated as we might like them to be (34). Pickaninnies, Bernstein impresses upon us, are “in all senses of the word, minor” (35), even more so because they are “non-child[ren]” (34), since the dominant representation of childhood was (and continues to be) coded as white. In order to elucidate upon this striking claim, Bernstein points squarely at the trope of unfeeling pickaninnies who are immune to pain as the culprit for their exclusion from the category of “child,” insightfully noting that they are the “mirror image of both the always-already pained African American adult and the ‘childlike Negro’” (36). Pickaninny characters, Bernstein implies, are liminal figures, unidentifiable because they do not suffer like either their black adult or white child counterparts do. This is certainly true of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Topsy, one of the literary pickaninnies that Bernstein uses to confirm her hypothesis, arguing that “Topsy, emptied of innocence, became the prototype for the black pickaninny”—characters who were so “grotestque as to suggest that only white children were children” (16). By this definition, we can also see how the label of “pickaninny” usefully extends beyond the African American context to other racialized youth; I think here of Shakespeare’s abused orphan Caliban and Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff, who in childhood seemed “hardened . . . to ill treatment,” withstanding “blows without winking or shedding a tear” (38). It does
not escape me that each of these non-children, each of these pickaninnies, is originally parentless and “adopted” by figures in racially, socially, and economically superior positions—a similarity that of course implicates the “pickaninny” into more contemporary discourses, like those of transnational and transracial adoption.

On the one hand, Racial Innocence addresses the ways that childhood, innocence, and race are inextricably linked in a process that leads to “[t]he libel that African American juveniles were invulnerable, did not suffer, and were not victims,” thus “defin[ing] them out of childhood itself” (42). In this case, innocence is racialized in a way that refuses black juveniles the title of “child”—a posture that, in recent history, implicitly denoted innocence, purity, and goodness. On the other hand, however, Bernstein also insists that racial innocence is a “form of deflection, a not-knowing or obliviousness that can be made politically useful” (41). In other words, racial innocence is a version of colour-blindness, where racial difference is ironically made unimportant by highlighting behavioural differences as the main factor of Otherness. Bernstein refers to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, this time pointing out why the angelic martyr, Little Eva, whose moral purity is symbolically inextricable from her Aryan whiteness, might sit on Uncle Tom’s knee without hesitation (Bernstein 93) or befriend, and by extension cure, the “goblin-like” Topsy of her pickaninny naughtiness (Stowe 268).

With Racial Innocence, Bernstein directs our attention to such scenes and characterizations in American canonical works about race and identity, revealing provocative elements that have gone unnoticed through the decades.

The caresses shared by Eva and Tom, summarized by Bernstein as “codified racially powerful touches” (93), are mirrored in some of the scriptive things marketed alongside Stowe’s novel. Some of the miscellaneous “Tomitudes”—which “involved domestic items such as card games, book illustrations, handkerchiefs, and figurines” (95)—capture, for instance, these touches and their affects, in the forms of visible, useable, and most importantly buyable objects. Bernstein elaborates:

In one nineteenth-century metal statuette . . . Tom inclines toward Eva and encircles her with his arms, while Eva balletically arches her back and reaches toward Tom’s face and neck. This statuette depicts an embrace between Tom and Eva, but many other mass-produced goods connect Eva and Tom through the body of the consumer. (95)

Bernstein is drawn to this object because it scripts a “physical tenderness . . . through a person’s use” of it (95); in other words, it is not the depicted scene that evokes sentiment, but the way that the owner of the statuette uses it, looks at it, displays it, and cherishes.
Much of Bernstein's book is spent analyzing a variety of scriptive things whose calculated uses imply racialized projects in the marketing of both goods and ideas. Bernstein reminds us that “[s]criptive things . . . issued directions for their manipulation, and these movements—when executed compliantly, altered, or refused—performed gender, class, and race” (98). Bernstein offers the example of a “Tomitude” card game, produced by V. S. W. Parkhurst, which featured illustrations of a different character on each card. As Bernstein notes, the instructions “‘direct[ed] the consumer to ‘hold’ Little Eva and Uncle Tom literally to enfold the cards within the hands” (95). Images of Little Eva and Uncle Tom are literally pressed upon one another, bound in the player's hand, creating what I presume is an even greater suggestion of intimacy. The way that the game directions script the individual cards amplifies the intimacy that is already exaggerated in the statuette of the two characters embracing.
Not all of the scriptive things that Bernstein acknowledges in *Racial Innocence* are shaped by explicit direction as the Parkhurst cards were. In one of two chapters about dolls, Bernstein addresses Johnny Gruelle’s now ubiquitous Raggedy Ann, a figure whose “concatenation of ruralism, patriotism, and nostalgia for antebellum America resonated powerfully in 1915,” when Gruelle first patented her image (148).

In her effort to insist that Raggedy Ann represents “the complicated black-and-whiteness of the face-painted minstrel performer . . . that could, depending on the circumstances and the audience, reveal or screen out knowledge of race, history, and violence,” Bernstein cites a number of ways that Raggedy Ann is “saturated . . . with racial meanings” (149):

Much as Raggedy Ann’s name conjoined African American ragtime music with [James Whitcomb] Riley’s Midwestern poetry, her visual attributes . . . amalgamated Gruelle’s mother’s childhood doll with a minstrel doll called the Golliwogg. Gruelle further associated Raggedy Ann with blackface when he connected her to the role of Topsy as performed in Tom shows. . . . Gruelle [also] constructed Raggedy Ann as an imitation of and homage to the character of the Scarecrow of Oz . . . itself based in and animated by blackface minstrelsy. All these ancestors left traces in Raggedy Ann. (149)

Setting up her argument, Bernstein offers a historical summary of Raggedy Ann, including its literary co-production as a “book-and-doll combination” (150), a “racial genealogy of cuddly dolls” (153), and a summary of the features that Raggedy Ann borrows from Topsy, Scarecrow, and the Golliwogg (most significant of which would be their “imperviousness to pain” and “tendency toward benign mischief” [181]).

The assumption that Raggedy Ann was not meant to express a blend of her white American cuddly doll and minstrel blackface antecedents but instead an inharmonious clashing of these two worlds is, Bernstein argues, evidenced by another scripted thing: the two-headed Topsy-Turvy Doll who, depending on which way she is flipped, is hiding either an upside-down black or white visage beneath her bifurcating skirt.

It is the combination of Raggedy Ann’s racialized origins and her soft body that shapes the problematic script of how she was (meant to be) used. Assuming that “soft dolls such as Raggedy Ann encouraged their owners to take specific actions” (185), Bernstein delineates the two ways that children interacted with her physically: by cuddling or abusing her. Given that Raggedy Ann was marketed as an unbreakable toy, the idea that she can withstand violence more insistently likens her to the “unfeeling” and “unchildlike” (35) pickaninny than her connection with Topsy, the Golliwogg, or Scarecrow, therefore solidifying her
implied blackness as well as her deferred position as a deferred non-child and non-subject. Bernstein links the scripted treatment of Raggedy Ann—violated, thrown about, and most importantly hung to dry from a clothesline—with the literal and symbolic ravaging and lynching of black Americans at the height of the Jim Crow era. Here again, Bernstein reminds us that those objects so familiar in our lives have legacies that must be addressed. Bernstein ends this section with a statement that, amid so many other potent arguments, inflicts the most poignant accusation that summarizes her theory on racial innocence. “Raggedy Ann,” she explains, “as insensate to pain as any other imagined faithful slave, any other pickaninny, enjoys being thrown, boiled, wrung out, skinned, and hanged. It’s racially innocent fun” (193).

Since a book wherein the author allocates nearly fifty per cent of its analysis to the study of race and dolls must at least acknowledge the Clarks’ Doll Test, it is not surprising that Bernstein’s final chapter relies heavily on the Clarks’ findings (although it is worth noting that the Clarks do not make an appearance, aside from a brief cameo in the introduction of the book, until this point). In the Clarks’ experiments, which have since been questioned for the ways that the testers insinuated their hypotheses onto the subjects by means of loaded and leading questions, the conclusion they established was that black and white children preferred white baby dolls and associated whiteness with “goodness” and “beauty.”

Bernstein argues that black dolls, because of the “publicity of doll play[,] enabled children to influence each other” (211). Again, Bernstein is direct and polemical: “White children, as doll-players, were not only repositories and reflectors of racist culture; they were its co-producers” (212).

**Scripted Wannabes: Bluest Eyes, Black Barbies, and Bratz**

Bernstein’s text immediately evokes connections to one example of African American literature that addresses dolls and race, a work that Bernstein herself addresses throughout *Racial Innocence*: Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. This forty-year-old novel offers a representation of black girlhood that explores, among other things, the significance of objects of play in connection to the development of black subjectivity.

Known to challenge simplistic readings of African American identity, Morrison acknowledges and
contradicts the Clarks’ findings in her first novel. This book, which, more than any of Morrison’s other works, is firmly focused on the complexities of black childhood in the United States, addresses the ways that children’s toys, merchandise, entertainment, and food are consumed by youth of differing racial and class positions. Early in the novel, Claudia MacTeer, Morrison’s black child narrator, describes how she is “revolted by and secretly frightened of [the] round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair” on the Raggedy Ann dolls she quickly learns to avoid (20). Claudia claims that she resists the script set out for her, which outlines what she was “expected to do with the doll,” because she has no interest in feigning motherhood (20). If we follow Bernstein’s argument in *Racial Innocence*, however, we might also read Claudia’s abhorrence of Raggedy Ann as a reaction against the implied minstrelsy of the doll as well as its scripted violence that, by extension, implicates how Claudia herself might be abused and how her childhood might be infinitely deferred (or denied) as something that is negated by her blackness. Given that Claudia is susceptible to abuse by adults and white(r) children throughout the novel, her rejection of Raggedy Ann might have more to do with what the doll stands in for and can be used as, than with its grotesque appearance.

Claudia is also “bemused” by the blue-eyed baby dolls she is given, which are scripted as exclusive, valuable, and beautiful possessions. Bernstein herself addresses this scene in Morrison’s novel, pointing out that Claudia hints at how she is scripted by “[a]dults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, [and] windowsigns” to cherish her “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” (20), but she finds an alternative way to interact with it (Bernstein 29). Rather than treasuring an object that embodies a beauty aesthetic so unreflective of her own appearance, Claudia dissects her doll, dismembering it to “see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability” (20). With a tactic she would come to employ in her later novels as well, Morrison crafts a protagonist who gestures toward the stereotype, the script, the expectation, and then protests the simplicity of those assumptions. Here, Claudia undermines the Clarks’ findings when she rejects the white baby doll out of both jealousy and distrust. Moreover, following Bernstein’s suggestion that there is a tradition of violating black dolls that is both an antecedent to and consequence of what is presumed to be black children’s imperviousness to pain, here we see the constructedness of that Otherness that renders certain dolls (and the children they represent) devoid of feeling. In other words, as Claudia decimates the “hard unyielding” and “bone-cold” white baby doll, which offers the “sweet and plaintive cry ‘Mama,’” as she proceeds to “[b]reak off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, [and] twist the head around”
(21), she is Othering it, deferring it as non-child. In effect, she transforms it into what Bernstein would label a pickaninny: an unfeeling, non-reactive, impervious thing. When Claudia tortures the white baby doll, its routine response makes it the unfeeling, unresponsive, unchildlike thing that is so easily denied. Thus, because Claudia renders the doll impervious to pain, she blackens the doll as a pickaninny and in doing so reverses the racialization of the trope. Contrary to Bernstein’s argument that the pickaninny is “always of colour” (35), here I think that the pickaninny is re-envisioned; I wonder if the pickaninny is in fact first and foremost a young subject who is violated and disenfranchised, and upon whom race has been importantly (and irreversibly) implicated.

It is not until the final pages of *Racial Innocence* that Bernstein tackles the question of how black children play with “black dolls [that] had for over a century scripted violent and degrading play-performances . . . that labeled African Americans as naturally servile and insensate to pain” (234). She mentions the doomed National Negro Doll Company, whose efforts to erase the connection between scripted violence, black dolls, and black youths by producing fragile dolls that insisted on scripted reverence predictably became an ironic metaphor for the issues the African American community was facing. But the solution is not simply to supply African American children with black dolls; as Claudia’s behaviour in *The Bluest Eye* implies, children are curious to take apart the images and ideologies repeated in scripting beauty as well as violence, in order to understand how and why they are working. Replacing black dolls that are scripted in one way with black dolls that are scripted in another way does
not—and cannot—resolve the deeply felt anxieties and insecurities experienced by children of colour in a white supremacist society.

I wish to conclude this essay with a brief reading, through Bernstein’s framework, of some more contemporary dolls that are meant to speak to—and reflect—North American children of colour in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Notably, the most notorious mass-produced dolls in the late twentieth century were evidently created as “ethnic alternatives” to their white counterparts. These alternative dolls, which “come in a rainbow coalition of colours, races, ethnicities, and nationalities” (duCille 338), are encapsulated by “Black Barbie,” who had a handful of precursors and has had many reinventions since she first appeared in 1980. Black Francie, an African American version of Barbie’s (white) cousin Francie—they were made from the same mould—was introduced in 1967, followed by Julia in 1968 and Cara in 1971. When Black Barbie entered the scene, she reflected African American culture and physical features in ways that, as Ann duCille points out, “raise[d] many difficult questions about difference, authenticity, and the problematic categories of the real and the symbolic, the typical and the stereotypical” (342). Supposedly marketed to children of all racial identities, Black Barbie was nonetheless intended to celebrate racial and cultural differences, and she has enjoyed several incarnations, most recently in the form of the “So in Style” collection of six black dolls of varying skin tones and hair types. Sharon Raynor expresses the psychological significance that Black Barbie had on her perceptions of beauty and race, extolling the doll’s ability to “blur . . . the lines between race, class, and gender because it became a symbol of acceptance, identity, and power” (181).

Certainly, the inclusion of Black Barbie offers a level of self-recognition and positive subjectivity formation for consumers previously unacknowledged by the traditional blond Barbie’s appearance, but as many scholars have pointed out, Black Barbie “look[s] remarkably like the stereotypical white Barbie, modified only by a dash of colour and a change of clothes” (duCille 338). Since her official inauguration three decades ago, Black Barbie has consistently evoked debate for paradoxically repeating reductive and fetishistic performances of Otherness in combination with thoughtless privileging of white beauty norms (through the use of the traditional Barbie moulds). Mary F. Rogers explains that, “[o]n the one side, one can reduce them to different Others who dress distinctively enough to stand out and look foreign; on the other side, one can reduce them to EuroAmerican wannabes” (52). Essentialist fashionings that feature the 1990s dolls Shani, Nichelle, and Asha (in the Soul Train collection) wearing kente cloth, metallic leopard-print unitards, and displaying “butt enhancement[s]” that have been “greatly exaggerated”
(duCille 344) are juxtaposed with the “optical illusions” of difference that do little beyond darkening traditional Barbie’s long, straight hair and changing her skin tone. In other words, racial differences are undermined while cultural differences are inflated (and stereotyped) through the production and packaging of this ethnic alternative to the authentic, the real, the blond Barbie.²

In her article “Can the Subaltern Shop?” Lisa Guerrero presents the twenty-first-century offering, by MGA Entertainment, of the Bratz doll line as Barbie’s replacement, citing their racially plural “hipness” (187) as an alternative to what is undoubtedly Barbie’s stodgy white supremacist racial hierarchy. The differences between Barbie and the Bratz are numerous: Bratz are a group without the original or main figure that Barbie unquestionably is among her own crew; while Barbie’s figure is supposedly sexually innocuous despite her unrealistically hyperbolized womanly form, the exaggerated heads of the Bratz dolls suggest a cuteness that is undermined by their overtly sexualized postures, fashions, and facial expressions; Barbie embodies mainstream ideologies of naive niceness, while the Bratz are presented, particularly in the “Totally Tattoo’d” collection, as countercultural, subversive, and brazenly saucy. Most importantly to Guerrero, “[t]he dolls’ skins are darker than the traditional Barbie . . . ; their eyes are shaped differently; their lips are fuller; and their hair comes in varied shades of black, brown, and blonde, not just the one-size-fits-all blonde of Barbie” (189).

The introduction, production, and development of these dolls is important, if only because they challenge the norms set out by figures like Barbie and allow children (and adults) of colour to feel represented and reflected in mainstream toy culture. At the same time, though, these dolls still operate within a discourse of deferral; they are alternates to the dominant, mainstream, and ubiquitous Barbie. Moreover, they repeat many of the problematic practices and narratives expressed by Barbie, including an essentialist reproduction of racialized cultural identities: for example, African American Sasha claims to love “street-style” and has aims to become a record producer, while Asian American Jade repeats model minority stereotypes when she declares that she loves to “spend hours at the chemistry lab.” Certainly, the four original Bratz are meant to represent four (multi) racial identities—their obviously different skin tones allude to their racial heterogeneity—but in an almost ironic reversal of wannabe-ism, Yasmin, Cloe, Sasha, and Jade all possess the same exotic almond-shaped eyes, voluptuous lips, and haughty expression of indifference. Those Othered facial features, repeated across Bratz of supposedly different racial identities, have become a new norm. As Guerrero rightly points out, it appears that “[r]ace merely serves as another kind of ‘accessory’ that signifies ‘hipness,’ without
incurring the actual costs and consequences of real-world racial signification” (190). Thus, once again, the problematic Black Barbie conundrum arises. Although Bratz dolls are marketed as a more elaborate interpretation of Otherness than Black Barbie, they still repeat outdated racial stereotypes and reiterate the same hegemonic systems of white supremacy and idealism.

With their undeniable poise, intricate clothes and accessories, and relational proximity (or similarity) to their white doll counterparts, it is obvious that these playthings are scripted to be cherished, groomed, and desired. Black Barbies and Bratz dolls are marketed as beauty icons; the intended scripts direct their users to idealize and to honour them. Even though these dolls are no longer scripted within the framework of the innocent or violated figures that Bernstein sets up in her book, they invite a different use, one that mirrors, I think, the way in which white supremacy is scripted upon their existence. By this, I mean that these dolls invite a particular performative use, and that use is to highlight (and perhaps even to fetishize) racialized difference as something that can be purchased, obtained, and contained through acts of play. The new script, then, is one of exoticized difference, of deferred subjectivity; racial progressiveness can be purchased and played with, but the assumption is that the marketable difference is their capital cachet. Since difference is consumable here, it reiterates the white norm as the dominant, as the primary centre.

As alternatives to the norm, Black Barbie(s) and Bratz dolls exemplify what has become scripted deferral in a North American multicultural ethos. Guerrero nicely summarizes this idea:

[A]s much as the [Bratz] dolls rely on images of difference, that difference relies on naturalized notions of whiteness. The dolls may be succeeding in presenting a new, and much needed idea of difference as beautiful and coveted, but that idea still exists in opposition to the “normal,” White beauty that Barbie, and the ideals reflected in her and her world, present. (194)

Included in Barbie’s white world is Black Barbie, the alternate, the supplementary, the Other whose scripted deferral reinforces the centrality and normativity of Barbie’s whiteness. The moniker alone—“Black Barbie”—implies her difference, her not-quite-Barbieness. So while black dolls are not literally or symbolically scripted as unfeeling targets for abuse (that by extension deny subjectivity and innocence for the African American children they are meant to reflect) as do those objects described in Bernstein’s book, a different scripted violence is perpetuated by their positioning as ethnic alternatives. The deferred relationship between Barbie and her counterparts scripts racial inferiority upon those Other dolls and the subjects they are meant to celebrate and reflect.
Of course, my reading of these dolls extends, perhaps too liberally so, beyond the scope of Bernstein’s study. In *Racial Innocence*, however, we get more than a historically grounded cultural reading of print and non-print texts. We get a framework through which we might think through a variety of objects in terms of their implications on childhood, race, and innocence. Most importantly, Bernstein reminds us that sentimental, picturesque, and childhood playthings are not benign or devoid of serious racialized implications. This critical book goes beyond the specific texts that its author addresses, although Bernstein does move between subjects with finesse and expertise; *Racial Innocence* casts a much-needed spotlight onto so many of the artifacts from our daily environments and invites us to problematize the ways that they have been scripted and the ways that we perform those scripts indiscriminately.

**Notes**

1 The book-and-doll legacy continues: Bernstein points out that, “[t]oday, book-doll combination sales have become the norm with product lines such as the American Girl Series . . . selling book-and-doll ensembles” that rely on a “mode of combination marketing of which Johnny Gruelle was an early virtuoso” (151).

2 For more on Barbie’s recent transformations, especially in light of the more recent Bratz dolls, see Orr.
Works Cited


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