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Playing Innocent: Childhood, Race, Performance

In October 2009, Keith Bardwell, the justice of the peace in Louisiana’s Tangipahoa Parish, refused to perform a wedding ceremony for Beth Humphrey, who is white, and Terence McKay, who is African American. “I don’t do interracial marriages,” Bardwell explained, “because I don’t want to put children in a situation they didn’t bring on themselves.” Bardwell, a white man, said that in his observation, “There is a problem with both groups accepting a child from such a marriage” and that therefore “the children will later suffer.” He asserted that his refusal to marry Humphrey and McKay did not constitute discrimination because he denied his services equally to a white woman and a black man. Bardwell claimed youth, not race, as his central concern: “I do it to protect the children. The kids are innocent and I worry about their futures.”

Condemnation of Bardwell, as predictable as it was deserved, splattered from the Hammond, Louisiana, Daily Star to the New York Times, from CNN to CBS to Fox News, from the blogosphere to YouTube. Commentators decried the denial of civil rights to Humphrey and McKay (whom another justice of the peace did marry) and defended interracial families and children, often citing President Barack Obama as an example of a successful son born of an interracial marriage. The next month, Bardwell resigned, but he remained unrepentant: “I’m not a racist,” he said. “My main concern is for the children.”

Throughout the uproar, one remarkable fact escaped mention: Bardwell refused to wed Humphrey and McKay in order to protect children who did not exist. Bardwell trumpeted his concern for “the children,” but Humphrey and McKay had no children together in 2009. The “children” whom Bardwell claimed to protect were wholly imagined. These figments competed with Humphrey and McKay: in Bardwell’s view, imagined children deserve protection more than living adults deserve constitutional rights.
The needs of imagined children trumped even those of embodied children: Bardwell understood interracial children to “suffer” and said that therefore he “won’t help put them through it.” Bardwell opposed interracial marriage, then, so as to protect imagined children from becoming flesh, to protect them from life itself. Thus Bardwell invoked “the children”—an abstract concept of childhood—not only to justify the denial of civil rights to adults, but also to excuse his attempt to prevent the birth of individual children those adults might choose to have.

Even Bardwell’s most vigorous critics did not identify, much less probe, these incongruities, but instead largely accepted Bardwell’s terms while contesting his conclusions: where Bardwell and his few supporters argued that interracial marriage hurts children, opponents responded that it benefits or at minimum does not harm children. Both sides, then, invoked abstract childhood to support their positions, while neither hesitated to accord rights to adults on the basis of imagined children’s needs. And each side’s argument was, to some, persuasive. The very fact that polar arguments used childhood to support diametrical claims seems to have struck no one as odd. But it should have. Why is abstracted childhood so flexible that it can simultaneously bolster arguments for and against interracial marriage? How did childhood acquire so much affective weight that the exhortation to “protect the children” seems to add persuasive power to almost any argument? How did the idea of “childhood innocence” become a crucial but naturalized element of contests over race and rights?

Answers to these questions root through the nineteenth century. An antecedent for Bardwell’s antimiscegenation stance appears, for example, in Edward Williams Clay’s 1839 engraving, *The Fruits of Amalgamation* (figure I.1). This image catalogs the supposedly alarming results of racial mixing: a white woman nursing an infant of color, an African American man and woman dressed in finery and being served by a white butler, and even a cat and a dog apparently defying nature by playing together. However, the image’s adults serve literally as backup to a mixed-race child in the foreground, upon whom the image’s diagonal lines of sight converge. This child gives the image its visual focal point and title—he is literally the “fruit” of his parents’ marriage—and thus delivers the image’s political message. Such long-standing use of children in arguments against interracial marriage is well known; less familiar and more surprising are the nineteenth-century defenders of interracial marriage who also recruited childhood to their cause. In 1819, for example, Judge C. J. Parker ruled in the case of *The Inhabitants of Medway v. The Inhabitants of Needham* that
the commonwealth of Massachusetts, which outlawed interracial marriage, must recognize such a marriage performed legally in Rhode Island, so as “to avoid the great inconvenience and cruelty of bastardizing the issue of such marriages.” In 1833, Lydia Maria Child also argued against bans on interracial marriage on the basis that they hurt children: as Child pointed out, interracial couples “will make such marriages, in spite of the law,” and the children of these extralegal unions are often deprived of their rightful inheritance “because the law pronounces them illegitimate.” The pluripotence that childhood held in 2009—its ability to imbue arguments against and for interracial marriage with at least some credence—has been in evidence, then, for almost two centuries.

This book explains how these strange cultural phenomena—the invocation of imagined children within directly opposing racial arguments, the use of abstract childhood to justify granting or withholding the rights of living adults and children—became so familiar as to appear unremarkable. I show how childhood figured pivotally in a set of large-scale U.S. racial projects: slavery and abolition, post-Emancipation enfranchisement and disenfranchisement of African Americans, and, by the turn of the twentieth century, antiblack violence, New Negro racial uplift, and the
early civil rights movement. I argue that performance, both on stage and, especially, in everyday life, was the vehicle by which childhood suffused, gave power to, and crucially shaped these racial projects. Childhood in performance enabled divergent political positions each to appear natural, inevitable, and therefore justified. I call this dynamic “racial innocence.”

Racial Innocence

The connection between childhood and innocence is not essential but is instead historically located. During the colonial period, Calvinists did not believe that children were innocent; to the contrary, they lived with the terrifying idea that children, who were born with original sin, could die before they experienced Christian salvation, in which case they would endure eternal damnation. According to this “doctrine of infant depravity,” children were inherently sinful and sexual—even more so, potentially, than adults, who had learned, through rationality and self-discipline, how to control their damnable impulses. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, however, a competing doctrine entered popular consciousness. In this emergent view, children were innocent: that is, sinless, absent of sexual feelings, and oblivious to worldly concerns. This view of the innocent child assumed a variety of complex and ever-shifting forms, including the Lockean tabula rasa and the Rousseauian youth who was at essence an uncorrupted element of nature. American sermons and child-rearing manuals widely quoted and thus circulated William Wordsworth’s representations of children as innocent, holy, and able to redeem adults. By the mid-nineteenth century, prevailing beliefs about childhood inverted the doctrine of infant depravity: children were not sinful but innocent, not depraved souls risking hellfire but holy angels leading adults to heaven. By the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment. The doctrine of original sin receded, replaced by a doctrine of original innocence.

This innocence was raced white. Little Eva, the emblematic child-angel of the nineteenth century, was a spectacle of phenotypical and chromatic whiteness: in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe interlaid descriptions of Eva’s racially marked “golden-brown” hair and “deep blue eyes” with references to the girl’s habit of dressing only in white. Eva’s death,
arguably the best-known scene in all sentimental literature, occasioned a blizzard of whiteness: everything in Eva’s bedroom, from statuettes and pictures, to the bed and bedside table, to the girl’s corpse itself, was draped in white; and throughout the room, white flowers drooped in baskets and vases. The paleness of Little Eva’s body, especially her skin and hair, was not incidentally decorative but was instead crucial to Stowe’s plot, as when one of Eva’s “golden tress[es]” twined around Simon Legree’s fingers, and the “fair hair” terrified the slaveholder and compelled him to refrain, if only for one night, from sexually assaulting an enslaved woman. Little Eva was neither isolated nor unique but was instead, as Ann Douglas...
notes, the archetype of “innumerable pale and pious”—one might say white and sinless—“heroines” of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. Little Eva was a hub in a busy cultural system linking innocence to whiteness through the body of the child.

The white child’s innocence was transferable to surrounding people and things, and that property made it politically usable. This transmission occurred, for example, when Little Eva and Uncle Tom cuddled ecstatically in book illustrations, dramatic stagings of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, games, advertisements, and household items such as handkerchiefs (figure I.2). In these images, the propinquity between the sentimental white child, foundationally defined by innocence, and the enslaved adult caused the white child’s aura of innocence to extend to an African American character. Eva’s and Tom’s embrace made Tom, and by extension abolition itself, seem righteous, but the inverse political effect was equally possible: the white child’s embrace could confer innocence upon not abolition but slavery, as became the case three decades later when plantation writer Joel Chandler Harris posed an unnamed white “Little Boy” on the knee of the happily enslaved Uncle Remus. In each case, propinquity between a white child and an African American adult transferred innocence from white childhood to a political endeavor: abolition or post-Reconstruction romanticization of slavery, respectively.

To be innocent was to be innocent of something, to achieve obliviousness. This obliviousness was not merely an absence of knowledge, but an active state of repelling knowledge—the child’s “holy ignorance,” in the phrase of an 1822 article in *Blackwood’s Magazine*. James Kincaid echoes that idea in his characterization of Victorian childhood as a “wonderfully hollow category” in which “purity” is “figured as negation,” a “ruthless distribution of eviction notices.” Individual nineteenth-century children, like all people, forgot and remembered, but to be legibly childlike—to perform “childhood innocence”—was to manifest a state of holy ignorance. However, not just any obliviousness constituted innocence: to be childlike was not to forget one’s name or one’s manners, and was certainly not to forget hymns or Him. Rather, sentimental childlike innocence manifested through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and, most importantly for this book, race. Of course, no nineteenth-century children existed outside race (or gender or class), nor were any children perceived as unraced. Innocence was not a literal state of being unraced but was, rather, the performance of not-noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories. Little Eva loves everyone, of
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every race and age and gender and class, because she transcends the adult world; she is already halfway to heaven. In the iconic “arbor scene” reprinted on the handkerchief in figure I.2, artist Hammatt Billings positioned Eva’s hand upon Uncle Tom’s hand and thigh and thus visualized Eva ignoring racial prohibitions and not-imagining sexual congress. This illustration, arguably the best-known and most widely circulated image of Stowe’s characters, represented Eva in the act of not-thinking about race, gender, age, or sexual desire.27

This association between innocence and forgetting exists in paradoxical tension with the tendency of the culture of childhood to retain past practices. Historians have shown that the materials and practices that surround living children, as well as historically located representations of children, have unique abilities to recapitulate adult culture while seeming to deflect it. Fragmentary images or gestures often linger, altered yet recognizable, in the culture of childhood after they have receded or even disappeared from adult culture: one century’s proverb becomes the next century’s nursery rhyme; a woman’s mobcap of the eighteenth century adorns the head of a girl in a best-selling print of the late nineteenth century.28 Today, riddles such as “Why did the chicken cross the road?” and “Why does a fireman wear red suspenders?” are fixtures in children’s popular culture, but these riddles originated in nineteenth-century minstrel shows created by and for adults.29 Anyone who can correctly answer these riddles has memorized a part of a minstrel script—and the transmission of that script probably occurred during the individual’s childhood. Because the culture of childhood so often retains and repurposes that which has elsewhere become abject or abandoned, the study of childhood radically challenges many established historical periodizations. Sentimentalism or minstrelsy may have peaked in the lives of adults in the nineteenth century, but the popular cultures of childhood, this book shows, delivered, in fragmented and distorted forms, the images, practices, and ideologies of sentimentalism and minstrelsy well into the twentieth century.

Nineteenth-century childhood’s ability to assert a state of holy obliviousness while retaining and recapitulating cultural memory was uniquely useful to the construction and maintenance of whiteness. Whiteness, as Richard Dyer and many other scholars have argued, derives power from its status as an unmarked category. George Lipsitz notes that “whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”30 This “silence about itself” is, for Ann DuCille, “the primary prerogative of whiteness, at once
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its grand scheme and its deep cover." Childhood, I argue throughout this book, is a primary material in the historical construction of that cover. Childhood innocence—itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy obliviousness—secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status, in the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries. Childhood innocence provided a perfect alibi: not only the ability to remember while appearing to forget, but even more powerfully, the production of racial memory through the performance of forgetting. What childhood innocence helped Americans to assert by forgetting, to think about by performing obliviousness, was not only whiteness but also racial difference constructed against whiteness. Racial binarism—understanding race in terms of white and nonwhite, or a “black and white” polarization that erases nonblack people of color—gained legibility through nineteenth-century childhood.

A New Method of Historical Analysis: Reading “Scriptive Things”

The influence of childhood upon U.S. racial formation has been greatly underestimated because a crucial part of this influence occurred, this book will show, through lived behaviors—performances in everyday life. To scholars trained in the study of written and visual texts, these performances may seem ephemeral and untraceable. Past performances of everyday life can, however, be recovered. This book proposes a new method by which to analyze items of material culture in order to discover otherwise inaccessible evidence of past behaviors. The method entails using archival knowledge and historical context to determine the documented, probable, and possible uses of a category of object. This horizon of known and possible uses then informs a close reading of an individual artifact. 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 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. I detail this method in Chapter 2 and then use it in Chapters 3 through 5 to recover and analyze past performances that installed ideas about childhood in large-scale racial projects.
The handkerchief shown in figure I.2 provides a useful example of a material item that invited historically located behaviors. The handkerchief is one of thousands of “Tomitudes,” or items of material culture representing Stowe’s characters, that proliferated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lists of Tomitudes, from dolls and card games to statuary and embroidery to jam jars and tobacco tins, often appear in scholarship on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Scholars have been able to say almost nothing, however, about what people actually *did* with these items. The handkerchief frequently receives a highlighted mention within lists of Tomitudes, which suggests that scholars find the handkerchief interesting but inexplicable. One scholar writes, for example, “As testament to [Stowe’s characters’] popularity, manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic produced collectors’ plates, statuettes, porcelain mugs, and even muslin handkerchiefs that depicted Tom and Eva.” As in this example, the handkerchief often appears last in a list of Tomitudes, punctuated by the word “even.” Thus scholars mark the handkerchief as a puzzling curiosity, a strange little beacon that signals how much we do not know about the extensive material culture of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and therefore about bodily experiences of nineteenth-century domesticity.

We do know a good deal about the handkerchief’s provenance. John P. Jewett, Stowe’s first American publisher, created the handkerchief in late 1852 or early 1853: Jewett commissioned John Greenleaf Whittier to write the poem about Little Eva and hired Manuel Emilio to set that poem to music. The illustration, by Hammatt Billings, of Eva and Tom in the arbor is reprinted from Jewett’s first edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The handkerchief united these elements—illustration, poem, music, and material—and therefore capped a great deal of work on Jewett’s part. But according to Claire Parfait, Jewett seems not to have sold the handkerchief, but rather to have given it away to customers. The handkerchief, then, was an advertisement, an object whose purpose was to produce and channel consumerist desire.

The handkerchief did not, however, produce meaning only through its component texts—visual, poetic, and musical. The difference between the handkerchief and a leaf of paper bearing an identical imprint is three-dimensional materiality and the uses prompted through that materiality. To understand the Jewett handkerchief, we must think about it as a thing in use. We must recover the historically located practices the handkerchief invited and discouraged.

One use was verboten: nose-blowing. To blow one’s nose upon these
Christ-like characters was physically possible—and someone, somewhere, may have done it—but such an action would have been socially inappropriate at best and blasphemous at worst (for a contemporary analogy, one might think of a small American flag: it is physically possible to blow one’s nose into it, but that action would be shockingly offensive). Nineteenth-century handkerchiefs for nose-blowing, which resembled what one now calls “bandanas,” were typically red or brown, never white, and they included broad patterns that were designed to mask stains in an era when laundering was among the most time-consuming and exhausting of domestic chores. A handkerchief such as Jewett’s, featuring delicate designs printed on white cloth, was indisputably intended “for show, not blow.”

But how would a person show it? Use of the handkerchief as a doily or home decoration was physically possible but contra mid-nineteenth century custom. Handkerchiefs adorned the body, not the parlor: mid-nineteenth century women and men displayed artfully folded handkerchiefs in sleeves or pockets. This handkerchief, like other decorative handkerchiefs, was probably also carried in the hand, where it accented the bearer’s physical grace and served as an important element of sentimental fashion. Women commonly waved handkerchiefs at political rallies. But what could one do with this handkerchief that one could not do with another?

The answer appears in the print on the handkerchief itself. Whittier’s poem begins, “Dry the tears for holy Eva” and continues with a description of the imperative fulfilled: “tears are wiped.” Jewett had the poem printed on a square of cloth that could wipe and dry tears. The text and form of the handkerchief therefore work together to prompt not nose-blowing but tear-drying. Before one can wipe one’s eyes, however, one must produce tears. Jewett prompted this prerequisite weeping when he imprinted the handkerchief with Hammatt Billings’s illustration of the “arbor scene” in which Eva predicts her death and apotheosis. Billings illustrates the moment in Stowe’s text when Eva points and says, “I’m going there . . . to the spirits bright”—that is, to heaven.

The poem, the hymnlike music, the illustration of Eva predicting her death and ascendance, and the novel the handkerchief advertised all coordinated to overdetermine the linked actions of weeping and tear-daubing. Henry James famously wrote that Stowe’s novel was the “irresistible cause” of crying, but it was the handkerchief, as linked to but distinct from the novel, that channeled those tears literally onto and into the absorbent bodies of Little Eva and Uncle Tom. “We lived and moved,” James wrote figuratively, “in Mrs. Stowe’s novel”; and the handkerchief encouraged its
user to shed a part of his or her bodily self and to mingle that substance with the materialization of Eva and Tom. In an uncanny literalization of the empathy so prized by sentimentalists, the handkerchief user’s tears flowed into the capillaries of the fabric, plumping and weighting the characters, thus inserting the reader bodily and affectively into the story.

The act of weeping itself then prompted a secondary action: using a handkerchief to hide (and thus flag) one’s expressions of sympathy, the signs that one “feel[s] right.” Two of Stowe’s most positively portrayed white characters, Mrs. Bird and Mrs. Shelby, model this sentimental gesture at key moments in the novel. In the first instance, Eliza, who is in the process of escaping slavery, explains her desperation to Mrs. Bird by asking, “Have you ever lost a child?” This question’s explicit equalization of Mrs. Bird’s and Eliza’s children, and the assertion of a universal and therefore raceless experience of mothering, causes Mrs. Bird to “show . . . signs of hearty sympathy” by keeping “her face fairly hidden in her pocket-handkerchief.” In another pivotal moment, Mrs. Shelby enters Uncle Tom’s and Aunt Chloe’s cabin to inform the couple that Tom has been sold. Mrs. Shelby, unable to speak the terrible news, “cover[s] her face with her handkerchief” and “beg[ins] to sob.” An 1852 consumer who obtained the handkerchief from the publisher of Stowe’s novel, who was aware of the handkerchief’s imperative not to blow but to show, who was prompted by the vision of Eva’s death to cry, and who was instructed by Whittier’s poem to “dry the tears,” might well have spread the handkerchief across the face, hiding and calling attention to those treasured tears of sympathy. The handkerchief in this scenario masked the weeping eyes, covering the user’s face with the representations of Little Eva and Uncle Tom. A person who wore the handkerchief-mask, and who saturated Eva and Tom with tears, affectively and effectively mingled with the characters.

The handkerchief scripted this performance in that it issued explicit directions (“dry the tears”) in combination with cultural prompts (the image of a dying child) in the historical context of normative behaviors (show, don’t blow; weep, but mask crying eyes). In the absence of corroborating evidence, one cannot determine how any individual responded to these prompts. The method of reading material things as scripts aims to discover not what any individual actually did but rather what a thing invited its users to do. This act of scripting, this issuing of a culturally specific invitation, is itself a historical event—one that can be recovered and then analyzed as a fresh source of evidence.

The term script denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but
rather a set of invitations that necessarily remain open to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation. I use the term *script* as a theatrical practitioner might: to denote an evocative primary substance from which actors, directors, and designers build complex, variable performances that occupy real time and space. A playscript, whether it be George Aiken’s 1852 dramatization of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or Robert Alexander’s 1990 *I Ain’t Yo’ Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, combines properties of elasticity and resilience so that the play remains recognizable even as it inspires a unique live performance each night. A scriptive thing, like a playscript, broadly structures a performance while allowing for agency and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable. Items of material culture *script* in much the same sense that literary texts *mean*: neither a thing nor a poem (for example) is conscious or agential, but a thing can invite behaviors that its maker did and did not envision, and a poem may produce meanings that include and exceed a poet’s intentions. To describe elements of material culture as “scripting” actions is not to suggest that things possess agency or that people lack it, but instead to propose that agency emerges through constant engagement with the stuff of our lives.

W. B. Worthen points out that a powerful current within performance studies contrasts “archival” memory—written and material text that can be housed in an archive—with the “repertoire”—embodied memory of traditions of performance including “gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing.”\textsuperscript{46} Diana Taylor and others call for “shifting the focus from written to embodied culture, from the discursive to the performative” because the archive “sustains power” whereas the repertoire often enacts social agency and resistance, especially of oppressed peoples in the Americas.\textsuperscript{47} Taylor describes the “relationship between the archive and the repertoire” as “not by definition antagonistic or oppositional”; the two forms of knowledge “usually work in tandem” (as in the wedding ceremony, which requires “both the performative utterance of ‘I do’ and the signed marriage license”).\textsuperscript{48} However, a model of interaction, or even of harmonious cooperation, reifies a polarity between the two forms of knowledge.

The heuristic of the scriptive thing explodes the very model of archive and repertoire as distinct-but-interactive, because the word *script* captures the moment when dramatic narrative and movement through space are in the act of becoming each other. The handkerchief is both an artifact of and scriptive prop within a performance—that is,
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simultaneously archive and repertoire, with neither form of knowledge preexisting the other. Within each scriptive thing, archive and repertoire are one. Therefore, when scriptive things enter a repository, repertoires arrive with them. Within a brick-and-mortar archive, scriptive things archive the repertoire—partially and richly, with a sense of openness and flux. To read things as scripts is to coax the archive into divulging the repertoire.

Uncle Tom’s Cabin Is an Archive of Repertoires

Most scholars have problematically characterized *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as either a novel—that is, a text, an archival fixture—or a cultural phenomenon. To read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* only as a novel is to impose, in a presentist mode, an isolation that did not exist in the nineteenth century: there was, in fact, no historical moment in which *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* existed only as a novel. Even before Stowe sent her manuscript pages to the *National Era*, the newspaper that originally serialized the novel, she read many of those pages aloud to her children.49 Scenes from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* existed, then, as parlor performances before they became serialized chapters. Before Jewett published Stowe’s novel in the form of a book, he commissioned Hammatt Billings to create illustrations for *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; and Jewett circulated Billings’s images in advertisements in March 1852—the same month in which he released Stowe’s book. From its beginning, then, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* existed in multiple genres (parlor performance, prose, poetry, visual art, and material culture) and physical practices (reading, looking, singing, showing, weeping, drying tears, and masking, to name only the actions scripted by the handkerchief). It is therefore a mischaracterization to identify Stowe’s prose as the “original” and the theatrical performances, illustrations, and Tomitudes as “adaptations.” In an attempt to grapple with ever-proliferating genres and texts, many scholars have alternatively described *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a cultural phenomenon. This characterization is equally inaccurate, however, because this term misleadingly implies a unity or coherence among the disparate parts. Leslie Fiedler’s related term, “inadvertent epic,” usefully signals political reversals between Stowe’s novel and its reverberations in literature and films such as *Birth of a Nation*, but Fiedler overprivileges authored texts that in fact constituted but one aspect—and not necessarily the most influential aspect—of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.50
In contrast to the characterizations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a novel or a phenomenon, Henry James got it right when he described it as much less a book than a state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness, in which [people] didn’t sit and read and appraise and pass the time, but walked and talked and laughed and cried and, in a manner of which Mrs. Stowe was the irresistible cause, generally conducted themselves.\textsuperscript{51}

James, along with many of his contemporaries, experienced *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as neither a book nor a theatrical production in isolation (in this passage, James discusses both a stage performance and the novel) but as a set of practices such as walking, talking, laughing, and crying. In other words, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* existed in the nineteenth century as a repertoire. This repertoire shaped performances in everyday life, the ways in which people “generally conducted themselves.” These repeated stylized gestures produced a “state of vision, of feeling and of consciousness”—that is to say, subjectivization.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is best understood as a repertoire, and the stuff of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—books and illustrations, handkerchiefs and dolls, playscripts and stage props, photographs and statues—were in the nineteenth century, and remain today, scriptive things that archive that repertoire. A repertoire is by definition in constant flux, always being re-made. These re-formations occur deliberately, with the exercise of agency, as well as accidentally, on a small and large scale, through authored and unauthored actions. A repertoire is by definition relational; it exists among people, over time, and, I argue throughout this book, through people’s everyday physical engagements with things.

By interpreting *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a repertoire, this book offers a new understanding of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as profoundly and uncomfortably collaborative—as neither a sprawling-yet-coherent phenomenon nor a multiply-authored “inadvertent epic,” but instead as a formation of influence and cross-influence that is internally contentious and surprisingly tightly woven without ever becoming unified; that constantly transposes among theatrical, visual, literary, and, crucially, material genres; and that is not always authored.

As a repertoire, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* circulated practices of performance between the theater and the home. The Howard family theatrical troupe, one of the first companies to stage *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, provides a good example of how this bidirectional transmission occurred. The Howards
exported practices of performance from the theater to the home when they sold souvenirs from their theater lobbies, including statuettes and a songbook that enabled audience members to restage at home the songs that the Howards sang in their production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But the Howards also imported gestures from the home to the theater, and material culture conveyed these performances as well. The Howard family used a script by George Aiken that is well known to have lifted dialogue directly from Stowe’s novel. As I show in Chapter 3, however, Aiken also embedded in his script tableaux that restaged each of the six illustrations that Billings created for Jewett’s first American edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—including the arbor scene imprinted on the handkerchief and so many other items of material culture. These illustrations, materialized in three-dimensional things such as handkerchiefs and books, scripted domestic performances. The Howards, then, quoted not only Stowe’s prose and Billings’s images but also the gestures and feelings that coordinated through the material culture of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—even as they sold domestic knickknacks in their theater lobbies. Thus the Howards connected the parlor and the stage. These performances domesticated the theater and theatricalized the home to create what Lauren Berlant has called an “intimate public”—one centered not on women, but on children.52

The repertoires of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were crucial to the installation of childhood innocence in large-scale racial projects. Stowe did not invent racial innocence, but through her iconic child-characters, especially Little Eva (and the young George Shelby, who receives extended attention in Chapter 3), Stowe captured and refracted the practices of racial innocence from existing sentimental culture, and transmitted those practices back into the popular culture in a newly focused, vivid, potent, and usable form.

In one of its most important functions, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* installed a black-white logic in American visions of childhood. This installation occurred primarily through the characters of Eva and Topsy. In creating Topsy, Stowe drew upon existing minstrel humor (which is visible in Topsy’s comic violence and dancing of breakdowns), but Stowe combined that tradition of performance with a sophisticated argument that Topsy was an essentially innocent child who has been brutalized—hardened and made “wicked”—by slavery.53 Stowe configured Topsy and Eva as a polarized dyad, the “two extremes of society”: the “fair” child with a “golden head,” and the “cringing” black child who had been viciously beaten by her previous owners.54 This polarization contrasted the two children but
simultaneously asserted that both were children, that Eva’s innocence was also Topsy’s. The violence of slavery, Stowe suggested, constituted an attack on Topsy’s natural innocence, which could be partially restored—transmitted—through the loving touch of a white child.

Polarity is a form of connection. For Stowe, the polarity of Topsy and Eva reflected their underlying equivalence and mutuality, but the repertoire slurred polarity into contrast, into difference alone. When Little Eva appeared in nineteenth-century visual, theatrical, and material culture, she remained an emblem of child innocence. Topsy’s stagers, however, cultivated the seeds of minstrelsy that Stowe had sowed in the character while exterminating the innocence that Stowe had insisted was Topsy’s birthright. This refracted Topsy, emptied of innocence, became the prototype for the pickaninny, an imagined dehumanized black juvenile and a staple of U.S. popular culture from advertising images (such as the Gold Dust Twins) to children’s literature, animation, and film (such as Little Black Sambo, Bosko, or the Little Rascals, respectively). The pickaninny—Topsy’s “fearful progeny” in Montgomery Gregory’s famous phrase—ultimately reconfigured the Topsy-Eva polarity itself. The dehumanized pickaninny, contrasted with an angelic white child, argued in a polygenetic vein for irreconcilable differences between black and white youth. Thus the repertoires of Uncle Tom’s Cabin configured childhood itself as what Linda Williams calls a “melodrama of black and white.”

In many cases, angelic white children were contrasted with pickaninpies so grotesque as to suggest that only white children were children. This is the flip side of the well-known libel of the “childlike Negro”: the equally libelous, equally damaging, but heretofore underanalyzed exclusion of black youth from the category of childhood. Topsy was written within Stowe’s argument that black children are innocent, but her reconstituted progeny defined black children out of innocence and therefore out of childhood itself.

The Scripts and Repertoires of Dolls

This book engages two main archives of repertoires: one is Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the other is dolls. Dolls, doll play, and literature about sentient dolls are crucial to this study because they weld childhood to slavery’s most foundational, disturbing, and lingering question: What
is a person? As Bill Brown has observed, this question has, from the antebellum period to the present, underlain anxieties so powerful as to constitute the “American Uncanny.” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* encapsulated and shaped this anxiety because, as Philip Fisher argues, the Emancipation Proclamation combined with the Union’s military victory and “the cultural work of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” to “redesign” the “boundary” between human and thing (Stowe acknowledged this project when she originally subtitled her novel “The man that was a thing”). In other words, slavery legally defined some humans as things, and Emancipation legally redefined all humans as humans. Antebellum abolitionist culture, including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, laid conceptual groundwork that made this legal change comprehensible and therefore possible. After Emancipation, however, “Lost Causers” and other white supremacists marshaled popular culture to undo this work and to redesign yet again the boundary between human and thing. This effort appeared especially clearly in the post-Emancipation effort by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and other groups to freeze the imagined “faithful slave” in stone monuments.

The cultural effort to objectify and later reobjectify African Americans found rich potential in doll play and doll literature, because all stories about sentient dolls reorganize the boundary between human and thing. As Lois Kuznets observes, sentient dolls in literature “embody human anxieties about what it means to be ‘real’—an independent subject or self rather than an object or other.” Around the time of the American Civil War, books about sentient dolls increased in popularity, and dolls in these books discuss their racial status, their duties to their owners, and even their relationship with enslaved people of African descent. The doll narrator of Julia Charlotte Maitland’s *The Doll and Her Friends* (published in 1852, the same year as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) describes dolls as “a race of mere dependents; some might even call us slaves.” The narrator pointedly informs the reader, however, that she is “not a negro doll, with wide mouth and woolly hair.” In this children’s book and many others, dollness itself is a racial category that denotes servitude. White-authored dolls in literature asserted their race’s natural servitude exactly as abolition and later Emancipation challenged the belief that African Americans were constitutionally enslaveable. In the anonymously published *A Doll’s Story* (also published circa 1852), two dolls, one of whom has just been purchased, discuss their relationship to American slavery.
“It is not pleasant to be sold, is it?” said little Minna; “so like slaves, of whom Emilie often tells me tales as I sit on her lap.”

“I never heard much about slaves. To be sure, you don’t mean blacks?” said Fanny. “I hope you don’t mean to compare pretty wax dolls to negroes? There was a doll or two of that sort in the Exhibition, but we never took any notion of them.”

“Did you not? Why, they were made of wax, I suppose, just like ourselves, and Emilie says black slaves are made of flesh and blood just like herself, and that no one has the right to buy or sell a fellow creature”

“You have some very odd notions,” said the Exhibition doll.65

This dialogue’s connection between the ownership of sentient dolls and the ownership of human beings is unusual only in its explicitness. From the mid-nineteenth century through the early twentieth, ideas and anxieties about racial slavery flowed as a steady, ominous undercurrent through much doll literature and through the physical properties of specific dolls. Dolls, as signs of childhood and property of many children, create propinquity between the idea of childhood and the racial project of determining who is a person and who is a thing; thus dolls tuck racial politics beneath a cloak of innocence. Chapter 4 delves deeply into one such instance: Raggedy Ann. Johnny Gruelle, the newspaper cartoonist who created Raggedy Ann in 1915, espoused racial egalitarianism (he wrote an unpublished didactic story that advocated race-blindness), but he loaded Raggedy Ann, as both a doll and a character in three dozen children’s books, with blackface imagery. Gruelle styled Raggedy Ann after the minstrelized role of the Scarecrow, as performed by the blackface star Fred Stone in L. Frank Baum’s 1903 staged extravaganza based on The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, and Gruelle also drew on the performances of stage Topsies and the British Golliwogg doll, which was based on American minstrel performances. Raggedy Ann was a racially saturated character: her white skin represented not racial whiteness but rather the complicated black-and-whiteness of the face-painted minstrel performer, and her stories imagined faithful servitude to her “Mistress,” a human girl named Marcella, as free play and fun.

I argue throughout this book that the idea of childhood innocence and the bodies of living children have historically mystified racial ideology by hiding it in plain sight. Thus blackface imagery, which has long been banished from polite society, thrives under the light cover of children’s culture and its penumbra of racial innocence. Minstrelsy lingers, too, in contemporary adult culture (the structure of Saturday Night Live is
roughly that of a minstrel show); but children’s culture has a special ability to preserve (even as it distorts) and transmit (even as it fragments) the blackface mask and styles of movement, which persist not only in Raggedy Ann and the Scarecrow but also in the faces and gloved hands of Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny.

Dolls provide especially effective safe houses for racial ideology because dolls are emblems of childhood that attach, through play, to the bodies of living children. Thus dolls refer in two distinct ways to childhood innocence (and when a doll represents a child, it gains a third level of reference). Dolls’ ability to appear innocent was understood by the Confederate military, which recruited white girls to act as smugglers: Confederate soldiers stuffed dolls with quinine, calomel, and morphine; and white girls held these dolls and passed by northern soldiers unchallenged.66 This literal, conscious act of smuggling drugs to support the system of slavery was possible only because dolls, the childhood they referenced, and the girls holding the dolls contained historical memory while performing innocence, performing obliviousness to history and to race. Dolls are crucial props within the performance of childhood because they are contrivances by which adults and children have historically played innocent.

Analyzing the historical formation of racial innocence through the repertoire of dolls enables me to foreground girls and girlhood without excluding other formations of gender or generalizing about girls’ practices in an exceptionalist or identitarian mode. Boys did and do play with dolls; some individual boy doll-enthusiasts appear in Chapter 5 (and it is important to remember that the prohibition against boys playing with dolls was less viciously enforced in the nineteenth century than it is today). Nevertheless, dolls have, for more than two centuries, been understood as the defining feature of girls’ culture and a metonym for girlhood itself. By considering dolls not as objects or texts that contain racial meanings but instead as things that script a repertoire of behaviors, I demonstrate the importance of dolls—and therefore girls and girlhood—to large-scale racial projects. Thus this book makes a case for the centrality of girls and girlhood to U.S. racial formation.

Overview

Chapter 1, “Tender Angels, Insensate Pickaninnies: The Divergent Paths of Racial Innocence,” charts the racial polarization of childhood innocence
Introduction

in the second half of the nineteenth century. I argue that pain, and the alleged ability or inability to feel it, functioned in the mid-nineteenth century as a wedge that split white and black childhood into distinct trajectories. The white, tender, vulnerable angel-child co-emerged with (and depended on) the “pickaninny,” who was defined by three properties: juvenile status, dark skin, and, crucially, the state of being comically impervious to pain. I take the pickaninny seriously not only because the figure abominably denigrated African Americans but also because it hinged the category of childhood to the libel that African Americans are insensate. As childhood was defined as tender innocence, as vulnerability, and as the pickaninny was defined by the inability to feel or to suffer, then the pickaninny—and the black juvenile it purported to represent—was defined out of childhood. African Americans understood these stakes, and writers such as Harriet Wilson and Frederick Douglass asserted black children’s ability to feel pain so as to argue, in Douglass’s words, that “slave-children are children.”

Chapter 2, “Scriptive Things,” develops the analytical tool of the scriptive thing and then uses it in a case study of one historical artifact: the “topsy-turvy doll.” The topsy-turvy doll comprised two dolls in one: a black and white doll joined at the waist and shared a skirt. A child flipped the skirt over the head of the white pole to play with the black doll, and vice versa. As Karen Sánchez-Eppler and other scholars have argued, the doll’s fusion of black and white referred to racial mixing, sex, and rape within the plantation system. African American women, the most likely creators of this doll-form, stitched politically volatile ideas into the children’s toy and thereby made those ideas appear innocent. The toy’s softness invited acts of cuddling on the part of white slaveowning children who possessed the doll; through this thing, enslaved women scripted performances in which children and dolls unwittingly smuggled enslaved women’s thoughts and anger into the inner sanctum of southern domesticity.

Each of Chapters 3 through 5 uses the heuristic of the scriptive thing, as detailed in Chapter 2, to examine closely one segment of the distinct arcs of black and white childhood, as charted in Chapter 1. In Chapter 3, “Everyone Is Impressed: Slavery as a Tender Embrace from Uncle Tom’s to Uncle Remus’s Cabin,” I show how an imagined loving touch between a slaveholding child and an enslaved adult (as pictured, for example, by Hammatt Billings in the Jewett handkerchief) traveled through and beyond the repertoires of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and ultimately changed from
an abolitionist critique of slavery to a Lost Cause defense of it. This reversal occurred, I argue, through performances scripted by material culture. Henry James described Stowe’s characters as “wonderful ‘leaping’ fish,” but in fact, the characters “flew” only when consumers literally moved the characters, that is, when people used scriptive things, including Tomitudes and illustrated editions of the novel, that materialized the narrative. Performance, then, accounts for the alation that James observed but did not explain. Eva, Topsy, and other characters, uncontained by Stowe’s abolitionist novel, traveled through the popular imaginary—from which they were appropriated by proslavery writers such as Joel Chandler Harris. Harris used Uncle Tom and his diminutive owner to invent memories of slaveowning as love and enslavement as the innocent embrace of a white child.


The final chapter, “The Scripts of Black Dolls,” concludes the argument, begun in Chapter 1, regarding the libel that black children did not experience pain, by showing how black dolls functioned as a special site through which nineteenth-century white children and adults articulated this libel. White makers of black “Topsy” or “Dinah” dolls encouraged—and often explicitly instructed—children of all races to beat, throw, soil, burn, and hang black dolls. At the turn of the century, however, African American children and adults began using black dolls as a point of resistance. African American girls refused the violent scripts embedded in black dolls, and throughout the second and third decades of the twentieth century, New Negro adults attempted to script performances of tenderness through those same dolls. In 1939, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark began their famous “doll tests” in which African American children were asked to designate either a black or a white doll “nice” or “bad.” A majority of African American children preferred the white doll, and these results were widely understood to reveal internalized racism. The Clarks’ findings figured influentially in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), in
which the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in public schools. I argue that the doll tests staged a performance of black children’s pain, and this performance of pain asserted that black children are innocent and are therefore children. This spectacular performance helped desegregate not only public schools but also the popular imagination of childhood innocence.

**Childhood Is a Performance**

These chapters, taken together, intervene in a central problem in the field of childhood studies: the relationship between young people (“children”) and the cultural construct of “childhood.” Is childhood a category of historical analysis that produces and manages adult power, as Caroline Levander, Lee Edelman, Jacqueline Rose, James Kincaid, Anne Higonnet, Carolyn Steedman, and many others have argued? Conversely, do the complicated lives of young people constantly deconstruct and reconstruct abstract idealizations of “childhood,” as is suggested by the work of Karin Calvert, Howard P. Chudacoff, and Steven Mintz, among others? Literary scholars who study “the child” conjured in texts as well as historians and social scientists who focus on the lived experiences of young people have reached an unsatisfying détente with a model in which “imagined” childhood shapes the lived experiences of “real” juveniles, who respond by unevenly colluding in or resisting their construction as “children.” Childhood, in this model, is abstract and disembodied, whereas children are tangible and fleshy. The model may declare superficially, with the requisite nod to Judith Butler, that “real” children cannot preexist “imagined” childhood; however, the model persistently suggests that constructed childhood and juvenile humans exist in tension with if not in opposition to one another. Because this model embeds opposition into the very foundation of childhood studies, the field has difficulty accounting for the simultaneity and mutual constitution of children and childhood. The field struggles to narrate the processes by which children and childhood give body to each other.

That act of embodiment is a performance. More specifically, that embodiment—the historical process through which childhood and children coproduce each other—occurs through surrogation, which Joseph R. Roach defines as the process by which “culture reproduces and re-creates itself.” Roach notes that the common definitions of performance,
including repetition with a difference and restored or twice-behaved behavior, “assume that performance offers a substitute for something else that preexists it”; a performing body “stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace.”71 This practice of standing-in defines surrogation, and the body that stands in is called an “effigy.”72 A performer’s body is an effigy as it bears and brings forth collectively remembered, meaningful gestures, and thus surrogates for that which a community has lost. Children often serve as effigies that substitute uncannily for other, presumably adult, bodies and thus produce a surplus of meaning.73 For example, four-year-old Shirley Temple engaged in surrogation when she adopted Mae West’s swagger and purr to play a prostitute in the 1933 short, “Polly Tix in Washington.”

Children’s ability to surrogate adulthood is well noted, often with dismay. Childhood itself, however, is best understood as a process of surrogation, an endless attempt to find, fashion, and impel substitutes to fill a void caused by the loss of a half-forgotten original. In this form of surrogation, the lost original doubles upon the construction of childhood itself as a process of loss and forgetting. The Wordsworth-influenced romantic and later sentimental child was defined by the experience of being catapulted, through birth, out of God’s presence and hurtled toward a lifetime of increasing separation from God. Immediately after Wordsworth declares that “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!,” the poet laments the loss of that aura: “Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy.” That growing boy travels from the light of Heaven but remains within its radiance: he “still is Nature’s Priest.” Only the onset of adulthood blunts the senses to God’s light: “At length the Man perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day.”74 It’s all downhill from the first breath: to grow is to lose sacred childhood innocence, and each day the young person develops, the essential child dies a little. As Carolyn Steedman has shown, by the twentieth century, childhood became an emblem of a lost past, of a lost self, and of memory itself.75

Performance, like childhood, is by definition always in the act of disappearing; performance and childhood are both paradoxically present only through their impending absence. As Peggy Phelan has influentially argued, live performance disappears as soon as it appears, and for this reason, mourning and loss necessarily infuse performance.76 The childhood constructed by romantics and sentimentalists, too, is defined by loss and consternated memory. If surrogation is an attempt to “fit satisfactory alternates” into “the cavities created by loss through death and other forms
of departure,” then, in the case of childhood, that cavity is constructed through the “departure” of growth rather than death. Both romanticism and sentimentalism constructed the death of a child not as dispossessive but as preservative, as a freezing that paradoxically prevents the essential child-quality from ever dying through maturation. Childhood is therefore best understood as an act of surrogation that compensates for losses incurred through growth.

A young person’s body is the most frequently used effigy, or vehicle, by which that surrogation occurs. Juvenile bodies are not, however, the only effigies that surrogate childhood; mature bodies can, as well. For example, in 1924, Clarence Darrow, attorney for convicted murderers Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, convinced the court to imprison rather than execute his clients with a statement that referred to the defendants as “boys,” and often as “these poor boys,” no fewer than fourteen times. Despite the fact that Leopold and Loeb were both adults past the age of majority, Darrow was able to construct them as innocent “lads”—a substitution that saved their lives. Nonhuman things, too, can surrogate childhood, as is frequently the case with dolls. James Kincaid is correct when he asserts that any available body (juvenile human, mature human, nonhuman) can be “thrust into the performance” of childhood. Kincaid errs, however, when he argues that juvenile actors play no special role in the performance of childhood because “[a]ny image, body, or being we can hollow out, purify, exalt, abuse, and locate sneakily in a field of desire will do for us as a ‘child’” and that therefore the “child is not, in itself, anything.” Kincaid mistakes the possibility of an alienated fit between effigy and surrogation (that is, a body other than a juvenile human’s performing “childhood”) for absence of a relationship between the actor and the performance. The relationship between effigy and surrogation is flexible—not incidental, as in Kincaid’s model, but often perverse.

The issue is that of casting. No body—juvenile, adult, or thing—can perfectly surrogate the ideals of childhood. No act of surrogation fully succeeds in restoring the half-remembered, imagined original, but different bodies partially succeed and yet fall short in importantly different ways. Juvenile bodies cast in the surrogation of childhood have the special ability to naturalize childhood, to assert an essential correspondence between childhood and the young human body—that is, to blur any distinction between children and childhood. Nonjuvenile bodies have other uses and abilities, and such effigies are not necessarily miscast in the surrogation of childhood. A visual mismatch between a mature body
and a performance of childhood can, for example, redefine a group out of adulthood and the rights associated with that categorization. This was the case, for example, in 1844, when the abolitionist Reverend Orville Dewey argued that African American “nature is singularly childlike, affectionate, docile, and patient,” and that such “inferiority” was “but an increased appeal to pity and generosity.” Romantic racialists’ casting of “the Negro” as “childlike” was anything but accidental; it strategically sutured abolition to white supremacy. Within such casting, however, a nonjuvenile actor may exert agency to undermine or at least complicate the production of meaning; thus the performance may produce multiple and often self-contradictory meanings.

Juvenile, nonjuvenile, and nonhuman bodies serve, then, as imperfectly useful and usefully imperfect effigies in the surrogation of childhood. A recent television performance demonstrates how these three kinds of effigies coordinate with each other. In 2006, Dakota Fanning, a blonde child actress who was then twelve years old, presented Shirley Temple Black with the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Life Achievement Award (figure I.3). In the televised awards ceremony, Fanning held a Shirley Temple doll and explained,

This doll was a part of my mom’s doll collection when she was my age. The day I was born, it became mine, and has always sat in my room. My mom loved her, I love her, and I know someday, my daughter will, too. I’m the fourth generation in my family who’s loved [Shirley Temple’s] films and admired her career of generous public service that followed.

Lifetime achievement awards mark longevity; they are by definition that which a child cannot receive. A child therefore seems an odd choice to present such an award. Fanning, however, was appropriate in her inappropriateness. As a white, blonde, dimpled child actress who excites excessive desire, Fanning refilled Shirley Temple’s particular mold of girlhood and thus gave life to the award recipient’s greatest past achievement. The speech (scripted, certainly, by a professional writer) repeatedly located Fanning as Shirley Temple’s heir: the Shirley Temple doll, Fanning’s speech claimed, descended from mother to daughter, and with that effigy Fanning inherited a tradition of performance and four generations’ “love.” As Temple’s blonde surrogate, Fanning made “Shirley Temple-ness” present in a way that Shirley Temple Black, the adult, could not. Shirley Temple’s extraordinary performance of girlhood resounded through Dakota Fanning,
Figure I.3. Dakota Fanning and a Shirley Temple Doll co-present a Screen Actors Guild Life Achievement Award to Shirley Temple Black, 29 January 2006. Photograph by Kevin Winter, Getty Images Entertainment, Courtesy of Getty Images.
and Fanning, in turn, resurrected that bluest eye of girlhood in the pale, never-quite-sufficient yet always excessive shadow of Shirley Temple Black, who is and always has been brown-eyed.

Even as Dakota Fanning gave life to Temple’s greatest achievement—the Depression actress’s performance of girlhood—she also marked Temple’s greatest failure: the inability to remain a child. Fanning, then twelve years old, teetered between childhood and adolescence and thus referenced both childhood and its loss. Her costume reflected that liminal status: the dress sported childish bows and a Peter Pan collar, and the tight bodice highlighted Fanning’s board-flat chest, but the dress’s elegant long sleeves and floor-length skirt (a contrast with Temple’s famously short peek-a-boo pinafores) suggested young womanhood. Fanning’s scripted references to her own infancy and her imagined future maternity called attention, too, to Fanning’s lost babyhood and impending exit from childhood. In but a few years, Fanning literally announced, she would be able to surrogate Shirley Temple no better than Shirley Temple Black could, and it would be time to bequeath the doll along with the tradition of performance. 84

The ever-growing juvenile body—Dakota Fanning’s or Shirley Temple’s—is an unstable and therefore permanently inadequate effigy for childhood. That inadequacy in no way impedes the process of surrogation, which relies on failure. Shirley Temple’s disappearance into Shirley Temple Black necessitated the emergence of someone like Dakota Fanning—much as Shirley Temple substituted for her now-forgotten predecessors, including the child star Cordelia Howard, who originated the stage role of Little Eva and who receives in-depth attention in Chapter 3. 85 The process of surrogation is one of repeated attempts at substitution, and these repetitions-with-differences are necessitated by each iteration’s inexact fit with the imagined original. Each ill fit compels yet another performance. The juvenile body is a naturalistic effigy through which to surrogate childhood, but that body continually grows, incrementally and inevitably losing the state of childhood. Therefore, the most naturalistic effigy is also, in its very nature, a vexingly inadequate one, and this inadequacy urgently feeds the process of surrogation. A reciprocal action emerges in which the ever-growing and therefore inadequate effigy of the juvenile body continually surrogates childhood, but cannot contain that surrogation. The surrogation overflows into other effigies, including non-juvenile bodies and nonhuman things such as dolls.

At the SAG Awards, each of three bodies—those of Shirley Temple Black, Dakota Fanning, and the doll—substituted differently, and
differently imperfectly, for Shirley Temple, the award’s true recipient (Temple Black’s service as Republican dignitary and ambassador to Czechoslovakia and Ghana notwithstanding). Of these three effigies, only one will never grow and therefore never lose childhood. The doll, even more than Fanning or Temple Black, memorialized the doll-like perfection of Shirley Temple herself. The doll retained that which Temple Black lost and that which Fanning displayed herself in the act of losing. The doll, juxtaposed with Temple Black, constituted “before and after” shots and thus measured the distance between Shirley Temple and Shirley Temple Black; it, even more than Fanning, emblematized Temple’s achievement and Temple Black’s failure in the surrogation of childhood.

Throughout her performance at the SAG Awards, Fanning clutched the Shirley Temple doll by the calves and thus assumed the posture of an actor receiving an Academy Award. Recruited into the role of “Oscar,” the doll surrogated not only Shirley Temple but also the sign of virtuoso acting itself. By simultaneously surrogating for Temple, girlhood, and achievement in acting, the doll articulated the performative foundation of girlhood. And as the doll doubled with Oscar, Fanning stepped into the role of Oscar recipient. Fanning’s lines bestowed the Life Achievement Award upon Shirley Temple Black, but the girl’s posturing body claimed Shirley Temple’s legacy—including Temple’s Oscar—for herself.86

Most children—not just famous ones—are virtuoso performers of childhood, because most children understand with precision the behaviors that children’s things script. Toni Morrison fictively describes the development of this competency in *The Bluest Eye*: her narrator, a black girl named Claudia, receives the gift of a Shirley Temple–like white doll and momentarily wonders, “What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother?” However, Claudia “learn[s] quickly,” she says, that she is “expected” to “rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it.”87 Literary and visual culture are key to Claudia’s certainty: she knows that she is “expected” to sleep with her doll because “[p]icture books were full of little girls sleeping with their dolls”—white girls and white dolls, that is.88 Literary and visual culture (in Morrison’s example, picture books) combine with material culture (dolls) to script performances, and children expertly perceive these scripts, which they then respond to in many ways, including resistance.

An understanding of children as experts in the scripts of children’s culture, as virtuoso performers, challenges the position, espoused by Jacqueline Rose and James Kincaid, that children’s culture is created by one,
empowered group (adults) and given to or forced upon another, disempowered group (children). The problem with this top-down understanding of children’s culture is that things, including books and toys, coordinate with an infinitely complex field of visual, material, theatrical, and literary culture so as to script performances whose meanings cannot be easily contained or controlled. Children do not passively receive culture. Rather, children expertly field the co-scripts of narratives and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself. The three prompts then entangle to script future play, which continues to change as children collectively exercise agency.

Toni Morrison’s fictive black girl, Claudia, understands that she is expected to “treasure” white baby dolls, but she resists the script and disembowels them instead (she also rejects “Raggedy Ann dolls [because she is] physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair”—all terms suggestive of Raggedy Ann’s blackface ancestry). The ultimate object of Claudia’s aggression is not Shirley Temple dolls, or even, exactly, the white girls they represent, but the “secret of the magic” that white girls “weaved on others.” Claudia asks, “What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww,’ but not for me?” That “what,” Morrison suggests, is the bluest eye of girlhood—an imagining of white girls as tender, innocently doll-like, and deserving of protection, and black girls as disqualified from all those qualities.

Racial Innocence historicizes the cultural formation that Claudia suffers and Morrison attacks. “Awwwww” is the sound of unspeech; it is noise that covers and distracts from the absence of articulated thought. It is ideology rendered so inarticulate that no rational argument can counter it. This book is about where that “Awwwww” came from, what its components were, and how it functioned within the history of race in the United States. I uncover the scripts, hidden in material things, that prompted everyday performances of that “Awwwww.” And I show how, by the mid-twentieth century, African Americans unmasked racial innocence—how they resisted and reconfigured racial ideologies that the glowing aura of childhood had, for a century, mystified.