

Yellow Peril, Oriental Plaything: The 1927 U.S.-Japan Doll Exchange

Most of the existing scholarship on dolls and race—for instance, Robin Bernstein’s groundbreaking book *Racial Innocence*—has assumed a black-white racial paradigm. This paper argues for the importance of Asian American critical perspectives to childhood studies by attending to the role of Japanese dolls in the transpacific circulation of racial affects. In 1927, just a few years after the 1924 Immigration Act banned Japanese citizens from immigrating to the United States, hundreds of “friendship dolls” traveled across the Pacific Ocean, bearing messages of peace and goodwill. Over 12,000 “blue-eyed dolls” were shipped from the United States to Japan. Meanwhile, American children greeted Japanese dolls in nationwide ceremonies. As fugitive “immigrants,” the Japanese dolls carried miniature passports and steamship tickets, trespassing across national borders to become “welcomed into the hearts” of American girls.

But what did it mean for dolls to immigrate in a time when people could not? This paper contends that the doll exchange attempted to alleviate racial conflict by displacing affective labor onto dolls and the young girls called upon to embrace them. Although the doll exchange was orchestrated to help repair political relations, the warm welcome the dolls received was contingent upon Orientalist notions of Eastern childlike femininity and the occlusion of Japanese Americans already living within the nation’s borders. By examining the doll exchange in archival records and in its contemporary representation in children’s books, I show how the fetishization of Asian “dolls” has not only found purchase in adult romance but in children’s culture.

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