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Book Reviews

A Review of *Minor Troubles: Racial Figurations of Youth Sexuality and Childhood's Queerness*

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Minor Troubles: Racial Figurations of Youth Sexuality and Childhood's Queerness. Erin J. Rand. Durham, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2025. 248 pages, $34.95 eBook; $34.95 paperback; $99.95 hardcover. Publisher webpage: https://ohiostatepress.org/books/titles/9780814215814.html

Erin J. Rand's *Minor Troubles: Racial Figurations of Youth Sexuality and Childhood's Queerness* is a powerful interdisciplinary work that brings rhetorical studies into urgent conversation with queer, race, and trans theories to interrogate the politics of childhood. The book demonstrates how childhood operates as a contested rhetorical terrain through which race, gender, and sexuality are regulated, showing that the "figural child"—an imagined, innocent, often white figure—is repeatedly invoked in public discourse to enforce norms, sustain whiteness and heteronormativity, and justify harm. Across its introduction, four chapters, and conclusion, Rand traces case studies ranging from sexting prosecutions and queer youth suicide narratives to school bathroom debates and sex education programs. These examples reveal how innocence and vulnerability are unequally distributed: white hetero(non)sexual youth are framed as vulnerable and in need of protection, while Black, queer, and trans youth are criminalized, adultified, or erased. Yet *Minor Troubles*

does more than diagnose harm. Through engagements with Black feminist, queer, and critical race theorists, Rand insists on recognizing the creativity, resilience, and futurity embodied by marginalized youth, reframing vulnerability as not only a mechanism of exclusion but also a resource for survival and community.

Rand's arguments also resonate with scholars in the rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM). By examining how public discourses around sexting, suicide prevention, trans health care, and sex education frame certain youth as "at risk" or in need of intervention, the book highlights how medicine and health policy become entangled in the racialized and sexualized politics of childhood. For RHM scholars, Rand's work offers a framework for interrogating how appeals to protect children can justify surveillance, pathologization, and medical regulation, while obscuring the agency and expertise of young people themselves. Ultimately, *Minor Troubles* demonstrates that the politics of childhood are never simply about children but about the racialized and sexualized values adults seek to preserve, and the alternative futures youth continue to imagine in defiance of those constraints.

The Introduction establishes the book's central premise through a 2022 moment when Arkansas Attorney General Leslie Rutledge defended anti-trans legislation as a way to protect children. For Rand, this move illustrates how appeals to child protection often legitimize harm, particularly against LGBTQ+ youth of color. She interrogates the rhetorical use of the "figural child" (p. 5)—an imagined, innocent, often white symbol—mobilized to regulate bodies, enforce norms, and sustain whiteness and heteronormativity. Central to this analysis is the concept of "racial figurations of childhood" (p. 9), which exposes how the ideal of the white child depends on the dehumanization of racialized youth and how reproductive futurism excludes Blackness from innocence itself. Through the term "hetero(non) sexuality" (p. 15), Rand argues that children are presumed straight yet prohibited from expressing nonnormative sexualities—especially queer, trans, or children of color. She argues that "childhood's queerness, in other words, emerges in part from the dissonance between the rhetorical figuration of the white and hetero(non)sexual child and the materiality of the Blackness, queerness, and the transness of the young people who populate these pages" (p. 17). Attentive to the ethics of representation, Rand resists claiming ownership over the stories she analyzes, instead using first names to affirm personhood while interrogating the boundaries between public and private

narratives.

Chapter 1 demonstrates how racialized and sexualized norms shape which youth are considered innocent, and which are criminalized. Rand's case study of Antjuanece Brown, a 19-year-old Black queer woman, and Jolene Jenkins, a 16-year-old high school student, exemplifies how consensual queer relationships become pathologized. When Jolene's mother turned over their private texts and photos to the police, Antjuanece was charged with felonies including child pornography and sex abuse. For Rand, this "sexting panic" (p. 30) was less about technological risks and more about anxieties over Black female sexuality and queer desire. She shows that "Black female queer sexual agency is not just subjugated but pathologized and criminalized in order to render white hetero(non)sexual vulnerability legible" (p. 36). The chapter connects this panic to longer tropes—Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Welfare Queen—that frame Black girls as older and more sexual. Antjuanece's masculine style and visible queerness marked her as criminal, while Jolene's femininity allowed her queerness to remain invisible. By the chapter's close, Antjuanece's adult reflections alongside an expunged record but enduring stigma, underscore how criminalization produces lifelong effects.

In Chapter 2, Rand critiques how vulnerability is unevenly conferred in public discourse. She examines media coverage of the nine suicides of queer youth in September 2010, which were framed as an epidemic of bullying leading to death. While such coverage generated national sympathy and projects like *It Gets Better*, it also fixed queer youth within a model that foreclosed recognition of resilience or agency and reified clinicalization. Even when not all victims were white, public sympathy clustered around the figure of the cis white gay boy. The nuanced warnings of a 2014 federal "Bullying Surveillance" report were lost when translated into public messaging that declared queer youth inherently "at risk" (p. 87). Scholarly discourse, too, reinscribes the Martyr-Target-Victim model, where youth appear as martyrs, targets, or victims—roles that generate sympathy but constrain complexity. These figurations allow adults to express care while avoiding engagement with deeper structures of racism, sexism, and transphobia.

Offering another case study, Chapter 3 analyzes the case of Gavin Grimm, a white transgender teenager whose lawsuit over bathroom access became a national flashpoint. The 2021 Supreme Court's decision to leave intact his lower-court victory affirmed that Title IX protects trans students, yet Gavin's legibility was made possible through whiteness, maleness, and respectability. This "temporal trouble" (p. 118) reveals how trans youth are

imagined as out of sync with developmental timelines of white, cisgender childhood. Rand juxtaposes Gavin's story with that of Larry/Latisha King, a Black gender-nonconforming youth murdered by a white classmate, whose embodiment was deemed unintelligible. Gavin's case represents progress but exposes the limits of trans rights when tethered to racialized frameworks of vulnerability.

Rand opens Chapter 4 by shifting toward possibility, examining Black feminist interventions that reimagine sexuality education. Rand recounts the experiences of Brittany Brathwaite and Kimberly Huggins, who lacked affirming sex education in Brooklyn. Brittany learned about HIV prevention only from a mobile testing unit offering free metro cards, while Kimberly recalls a doctor saying, "only nasty girls get gonorrhea" (p. 154). Situating these stories within abstinence-only curricula and eugenicist histories, Rand shows how Black girls are rendered both vulnerable and dangerous, denied recognition of desire or pleasure. Drawing on the "missing discourse of desire" (p. 171), she demonstrates how Black girls are doubly exposed: overexposed to risk and under-resourced in autonomy. Brathwaite and Huggins's startup, KIMBRITIVE, exemplifies a Black feminist "love-politics" (p. 184), proclaiming "Black Women Deserve Great Sex" (p. 181) and cultivating an "affirming abundance" (p. 157).

The Conclusion reflects on futurity through the controversy surrounding Cuties, a French film criticized for "sexualizing children" (p. 194). Rand argues that the outrage obscured the film's intervention: Black and Brown girls navigating sexual agency amidst cultural conflict. "Young people who know too much, who exercise sexual agency, or who are adultified by their race or gender identity become the scapegoats for the queerness of all youth" (p. 198). Yet Rand also gestures toward futures of resilience, citing projects like *Beyond Bullying* that enable queer youth to narrate their own experiences. Vulnerability, she concludes, can be "a resource, a site of connection and community" (p. 205).

Taken as a whole, *Minor Troubles* is a timely and rigorous examination of how childhood functions rhetorically to regulate race, gender, and sexuality in U.S. culture, even through medicinal systems. For scholars of rhetoric, queer studies, and health and medicine, the book is essential because it not only deconstructs harmful figurations but also illuminates how youth reimagine agency and survival. It is both a trenchant critique of adultist, racialized framings of innocence and a hopeful vision of youth innovation, resilience, and joy.

References

Rand, E. J. (2025). *Minor Troubles: Racial Figurations of Youth Sexuality and Childhood's Queerness*. The Ohio State University Press.

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