

**Christine L. Williams**

**Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality**

University of California Press, 2006, 256pp.

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*Inside Toyland* is a gem — a well-written examination of politics, inequality, racism and working conditions in the context of the toy store. In order to gain a firsthand look at the intricacies of retail work, Williams conducted her research by participant observation. She worked at two toy stores. Both stores are a part of national chains and at the time of her research employed about 70 workers. Despite the fact that both stores sell similar merchandise, and include large inventories of electronics, games, puzzles, traditional lines of dolls and action figures targeting boys (G.I. Joes) and girls (Barbies), most of which is produced off-shore, largely in China, there are very significant differences between them. The image of Diamond Toys that Williams paints reminds me of the toy store featured in the movie, *Home Alone 2*, where one's imagination may be set free. Often referred to as a tourist destination, Diamond Toys is located in an upscale urban shopping district and its mainly white customer base was primarily middle or upper class. The majority of the staff in this unionized store is white. By contrast, ten miles away in a redevelopment zone, referred to as a "bad neighborhood" by the workers, stands Toy Warehouse, a non-unionized store mirroring a number of other big-box retail outlets (Home Depot, Staples, Petsmart). Within the region, this store is profiled as having the worst problem with "shrink" or theft and the worst customer satisfaction rating. Its customer base is mixed, representing "every racial/ethnic group and every social class." Williams was one of four white women on the staff.

In *Inside Toyland*, Williams does not simply provide a narrow analysis of the labour process and working conditions — the makeup of the McJobs — within the retail sector. This book builds the analysis of retail work from the reshaping of working conditions and workplace culture within the new age of retail and consumer culture. This is the era of the giant discounter in which Wal-Mart and Target offer lower prices (or at least the pretense of lower prices) because they can sell more merchandise due to the enormous areas of their stores, the higher volume of sales, the intensity of the work and the poor levels of compensation. Within this context, Williams analyses in meticulous detail the working conditions and race-class-gender relations in the stores where she worked. Readers may suggest that a more in-depth examination of the erosion of retail (and other related service) work is warranted, particularly in light of diminishing opportunities within the manufacturing and public sectors — the traditional strongholds of "good jobs", declining incomes and the numerous stories of struggles to support families on service sector wages, and the vehement anti-union stands taken by Wal-Mart and other followers. However, the strength of this book is its attention to the detail of the everyday work at the toy stores. It is in this detail that Williams exposes the ways in which the privileges of whiteness, class and gender are reproduced and preserved.

Williams conceptualizes power and authority in the toy stores within a "matrix of domination" in order to account for the various configurations of race, gender and class in interactions of workers and consumers, workers and co-workers, and workers and management. She examines the ways privilege and entitlement are preserved and recreated in social interactions. Williams describes the various service rituals within the toy stores, including the ways workers are expected to serve customers, the scripts they are to follow, and the pressures they are under to promote sales. She demonstrates the ways these rituals are shaped to suit the particular mix of customers and clerks. She describes, for example, how customers' expectations of white and black service workers vary and

how workers modify the scripts to meet these expectations. She elaborates on the ways white middle-class women, the majority of shoppers at both stores, have developed a sense of entitlement that prevails over the worker-consumer relationship and at times tests the formal rules of the corporate structure. She exposes racist, classist and gendered stereotypes and assumptions held by both workers and customers by observing interactions on the “shop floor”, workers’ backroom banter, and her own interchanges with customers — both adults and children—, co-workers, and managers. Yet, although the jobs are highly routinized, and bounded by an elaborate set of rules and corporate practices, Williams does not lose sight of workers’ agency and creativity. She demonstrates how workers adapt their scripts to the particular circumstance, and by individualizing their interactions, they preserve their own dignity and self respect, despite their placement in work that is often disrespected.

Throughout the book, Williams compares the working conditions within the two stores, and describes a greater level of satisfaction at Diamond Toys. This does not surprise her, since Diamond Toys is unionized, hourly wages are higher, benefits are available, and there is a kinder, gentler and friendlier management. Overall, the atmosphere, including the layout and décor of the store, is more pleasant than the cookie-cutter warehouse “feel” of Toy Warehouse. Yet despite the fact that this store was unionized, the union was unable in her analysis to cut through the gender, class, race inequalities embedded within the structure and conditions of the work. Williams does not clarify why the union has been ineffective in this regard. But the question of unions’ ability to address or correct such inequalities may relate more generally to the history and structure of the labour movement and labour relations, rather than to the conditions within the service sector or this particular industry. On the question of unions, however, one story that Williams does not address is the matter of how, why and when Diamond Toys became unionized. With only 12-13 percent of the U.S. labour force unionized, (and around 9 percent of the private sector workforce), I am curious about the story of unionization at Diamond Toys. While a lengthy discussion of the unionizing drive at Diamond Toys would have taken Williams away from the central focus of her analysis, providing at least some background might have offered insight into the ineffectiveness of the union in addressing the difficult equity questions.

The heart of the this book and the very rich analysis centers on the question of the interconnectedness of gender, racial and class inequalities that permeate all aspects of work and consumption within these retail chains. Woven through the analysis of retail work is Williams’ consideration of questions of consumption, the prevalence of consumer culture, and the ways in which consumption affects working conditions.

This book powerfully exposes the politics and inequality embedded within consumer culture through an examination of low-wage retail work. It is a highly engaging expose of the reproduction of class, race and gender inequality. *Inside Toyland* would be of particular interest to those studying work, social inequalities, qualitative methods, or sociology of consumption. I highly recommend this book.

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