

How Do We Know Who We Are?

Image, Identity, and the Media

by Arabella Grayson, MA '96

How do we know who we are? That was the question I asked myself as I stood in the children's section of Barnes and Noble ten years ago, looking at an Addy paper doll and trying to reconcile her image with the publisher's story line.



Addy, one of a series of period dolls in the American Girls Collection published by the Pleasant Company in 1994, is an escaped slave. Holding a kerchief laden with possessions, her caged pet bird beside her, Addy, in a bright pink frock, cheerfully smiles on the cover of the package. She looks as if she could be on her way to the county fair or off to a church bazaar.

An enduring link to the past, paper dolls record social changes, illustrate attitudes and societal perceptions, and in the case of African Americans, often depict the caricatures and racial stereotypes that defined their place, role, and status in society. Paper dolls in comic strips, political cartoons, greeting cards, magazines, books and box sets, and as advertising premiums, particularly those produced in the mid-1800s through the mid-1900s, commonly depict people of African ancestry in subservient roles such as rotund mammies, fat-lipped butlers, wild savages, eye-popping sambos, and scary little picaninnies in tattered clothes. It wasn't until the early 1960s, fueled by the black pride movement and the sustained campaign for civil rights, that paper dolls began reflecting more realistic and varied images of African Americans.

How do we know who we are? This was the question I asked myself as I began collecting black paper dolls and came to understand the role toys play in shaping a child's beliefs and self-concept: toys are the tools we first use to teach children. Long before a child speaks, she sees. She looks. She observes. She comes to understand the world, first through images: images defined by her caretakers and reinforced through popular culture—toys, cartoons, television, commercials, films, books, magazines, newspapers. Images the media reinforces, defines, creates, and shapes. Images that tell us who *we* are and what *we* are and who *they* are and what *they* are. Images that we don't create and all too often do not even question, but

images that we allow to shape our self-perception and our worldview. It's true, *a picture is worth a thousand words*. And in the 16 decades since black paper dolls were first printed, it's a very revealing and oftentimes disturbing picture.

I started collecting black paper dolls ten years ago, after a girlfriend gave me a birthday card with the adorable Little Caribbean Girl Paper Doll booklet tucked inside. I did not recall seeing a black paper doll before and wondered if there were others. I found Addy in the bookstore and later learned that the first African American paper doll was also a slave girl—Topsey, the fictional character from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The Topsey paper doll was printed in 1863, eleven years after the book first appeared.

How do we know who we are? Like most, I learned first from my parents.

My mother graduated from a “colored” high school in Columbia, South Carolina, two years before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Familiar with the Kenneth and Mamie Clark doll studies cited in the Supreme Court school desegregation case, she and my father actively sought ways to instill cultural pride and a healthy self-concept in their children.

To understand black children's views on race and how these views shaped their self-perception and self-esteem, psychologists Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark conducted a series of studies from the late 1930s through the 1940s. In one research project, a group of 253 African American elementary school children were presented with two identical dolls, except one was white and the other painted brown. The children were then asked to respond to a series of statements identifying the dolls as either “nice” or “bad,” ultimately selecting the one that looked like them.

The results of the Clarks' 1947 study: two-thirds of the children preferred the white doll to the brown doll. Other Clark studies supporting these findings revealed that as early as age three, the majority of children identified the brown doll as “bad,” associating it with “evil, ugliness, inferiority, and shame.”

The Clarks' famous doll studies have been revisited in recent decades and psychologists such as Darlene Powell Hopson, who conducted her own study involving preschoolers in 1985, have had nearly identical findings.

My mother, a stay-at-home mom, and father, who worked multiple jobs—harbor master, scuba diving instructor, teamster, real estate investor—both understood the damaging effects of racism on children and the role toys can play in reinforcing stereotypes, particularly those assigned to people of African descent. So growing up, my three sisters, brother, and I primarily played with educational toys. My mother did a great job of choosing books with positive stories, and if the people in the pic-



Italian Fashion 2002, Legacy Designs, 2002. Illustrator Donald Hendricks. In the 1960s more realistic and varied images of African Americans began appearing in paper doll format. Illustrators Jackie Ormes and Dale Messick produced the first black fashion paper dolls in the 1940s and 50s.

tures were not black she would brown them in. As best she could, she chose images that were uplifting, ones that more accurately reflected our history in Africa and the Americas.

As I write this, I am reminded of an encounter I had while working as an admission officer at Mills. The year, 1992. The location, Mills Hall lobby, when the Admission Office was housed on the first floor. I am on my way out the main entrance, when I spot the ten-year-old daughter of one of my colleagues. Laura (not her real name), who is seated at the piano patiently waiting for her mom, has recently had her thick hair braided in an elaborate and very flattering cornrow design, one that complements her Hershey-brown complexion and highlights her African features. We exchange greetings and I tell her she looks like an African princess. In response, Laura looks stricken. Frowning, tears well. “I do *not*” she protests, “look like an African.”

Now, I am stricken. I have offended a beautiful, African-looking African American child by telling her she looks like what she is, an African.

What images fill her head? The paper dolls in my collection depicting continental Africans look menacing . . . savage . . . unattractive: Sultan Zugo, Svarta Nelly, Jocko, Jackie, and Jock. Not one princess or prince in the entire lot.

I try to calm Laura, who is getting more upset as I

explain that her negative perceptions of Africans as ugly, dirty, and uncivilized, and Africa as a backward continent, are flawed; however, she is not.

You are enough. Laura, you are enough. I have been feeling a need to say that to the women and girls I meet who suffer from low self-esteem, those who don't feel worthy because they believe that circumstances or ethnic origin or sexual orientation or the way they look make them less than enough. You are enough. Your worth is not determined or diminished by being born female or African American, unless you deem it so. To a large extent, your self-worth, your self-esteem, is determined by what you think about yourself and how much value *you* place on the identity *you* have created for yourself.



Sultan Zugo, a character from Tim Tyler's *Luck*, September 23, 1934. Popular playthings by the early 1900s, paper dolls can be found in comic strips, women's and children's magazines, in expensive box sets, and in book format. On occasion a person of African descent will appear in a stereotypical role.

According to authors Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning in their book *Self-Esteem*, self-esteem "is an emotional sine qua non—without some measure of self-worth, life can be enormously painful, with many basic needs going unmet." A person with low self-esteem takes fewer social, academic, or career risks. I look at all the mammy paper dolls in my collection: depictions of women, who, according to historian Michelle Wallace in her book, *The Myth of the Superwoman*, are "the personification of the ideal slave and the ideal woman: [an] obese, domesticated, asexual house slave with a world of wisdom, the patience of Job, a heart of gold, and the willingness to breastfeed the world" and wonder how many women's dreams died and hopes were dimmed knowing their roles had been so narrowly defined, their options so limited by society's assessment of their worth.

Until the 1950s most of the paper dolls of African American adults depicted maids or butlers, cooks, porters, or nursemaids to white families.

Learning about Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, both strong and brave historical figures, inspired my social consciousness, but did little to dispel my teenage awkwardness and self-consciousness in a society that tells me how I look is more important than what I know, where fitting in is the end all and be all. Corporations and advertising firms reap billions of dollars on the notion that I, in all my natural glory and forever changing body, will never be enough; that I will always be too something: too young, too old, too tall, too short, too thin, too fat, too dark, too light, too intelligent, too dull, too plain, too exotic, too too something.

When I was 13, I believed that I was too tall—at 5'7" I towered over most of my classmates. Like most teenagers, I wanted to fit in. I slouched to appear shorter. For an entire month, I believed my nose was too big. When I finally stopped trying to conform, I felt better about myself and my body. It feels good to feel comfortable in my own skin; not to judge myself or to reject aspects of my being based on ideals that exist in fashion layouts and on movie sets. It takes courage to be one's self in our celebrity-obsessed, quick-fix culture that tells us that in order to be more, have more, do more, to measure up, we must somehow change or look a certain way.

Pitted, almost from birth, against other females, the long cycle to compare and compete, to see who can be the most attractive (or the most successful) can become an all-consuming preoccupation. While boys are groomed to aspire to success, girls are still being taught that beauty is a woman's greatest asset. Personally, you may not believe the hype, but millions of women (and more and more men) seem to. With shows like *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* fueling the \$15 billion a year cosmetic surgery industry, there has been a threefold increase in the number of teens having breast implants and rhinoplasties.

I grew up in the 1960s and '70s, decades mired in

social upheaval. These were times of hope and revolution: hippies, Vietnam, the Voting Rights Act, assassinations (Kennedy, King, and Malcolm X), riots, the Motown Sound, Watergate, *Roe v. Wade*, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Diahann Carroll, a young, sophisticated actress stars in the television series *Julia*, playing the role of a beautiful, independent, widowed career woman raising her son Cory alone in a nice middle class neighborhood. She is the first African American, since *Beulah* aired in the 1950s, to star in her own show. James Brown sings, “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud.” I am. In the fifth grade, I read *A Glorious Age in Africa*, a historical recounting of African commerce and trade routes pre-dating the Atlantic slave trade, at least six times as I prepare to discuss it with my father during one of the readings he frequently assigns to supplement my homework. Through book reports for my father and my insatiable quest for knowledge, I know that my forebears come from great and ancient civilizations. I am taught not to be ashamed of America’s history, nor to think less of the countless generations of men, women, and children who have been enslaved and ensnared in a cruel and inhumane institution that mocked, ridiculed, and demeaned those of African ancestry and favored their European oppressors and their progeny.

In all our youthful glory and exuberance, my classmates and I walk across the junior high school stage during our ninth-grade promotion ceremony to Nina Simone’s lush voice telling us how wonderful it is “to be young, gifted, and black.” I believe her. Intellectually I can compete. I know I am as smart as the next person, even if society tells me differently; my parents have seen to it that I do not believe the lie. Fortified with cultural pride, and my parents’ early history lessons, I imagine I can do or become whatever I set my mind to if I am willing to work hard and persevere. I still believe that.

On November 12, 2006, at the opening reception of “Two Hundred Years of Black Paper Dolls: The Arabella Grayson Collection,” I ended my remarks with Judith Wilson’s provocative question, “How do we know who we are?” and her equally profound response (from *Autobiography in Her Own Image*):

Answer 1: Society tells us. “Society,” first in the form of family and other caretakers. Later, we learn our “place” increasingly via messages from institutional mechanisms—government, schools, media . . .

Answer 2: If society tells us lies, how can we know who we are?

Answer 3: Maybe the only thing to know is that we need to keep on searching.

It is through searching that I began collecting black paper dolls and recording an unknown aspect of America’s history. It is through the story of each one of



Described as “odd” and “goblin-like” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Topsey becomes the first African American paper doll. Two-sided figure from woodblock engraving with hand tinted watercolor. McLoughlin Brothers of New York, 1863.

these precious paper playthings that I trace my personal history of cultural pride and self-acceptance.

“Two Hundred Years of Black Paper Dolls” is on exhibit through April 29, 2007 at the Smithsonian Anacostia Museum in Washington, D.C. Part of the collection was displayed at Mills College at the F.W. Olin Library in January and February 2004. ■

A California native, Arabella Grayson has spent the last six years in Washington, D.C. working as a ghostwriter and public relations consultant. The author of the forthcoming book Precious Playthings: An Illustrated History of Black Paper Dolls, The First Two Hundred Years, she travels frequently to promote the exhibition, which will tour after leaving the Smithsonian. In the meantime, Arabella continues to work on an animation script (an adaptation of a fairy tale she has written for adults) and to hone her acting skills.