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The Fabric Behind the Doll

The Performance of the Black Doll in Early 20th Century America

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A game called “Life.” When playing this board game, we’re introduced to one of the most prominent examples of the power material culture can have in informing and constructing social dynamics. The board game takes its players through “life,” with required stopping points along the way. These stopping points assume certain things from its players. To name a few, it assumes they are heterosexual, that they have the ability to drive a car, that they are college educated, and that they intend on having children. These assumptions reflect the socially constructed normality’s of many present-day, Western civilizations. What’s more, the name of the game itself suggests an understanding of what one’s “life” *should* entail. While playing the game, participants absorb these assumptions and learn them as truths. In this way, the game “Life” constructs and maintains pre-conceived expectations of what creates success in both the game “life” and in one’s personal life.

Other forms of material culture hold a similar type of power. Through the act of play, a child is taught a certain way to engage with his or her toy. The child plays with the toy in a way that mimics what they see around them. However, children also learn from their own play. Each act of play further engrains a certain phenomenon in a child’s head. The composition and subtleties within the toy greatly inform this type of play. The black dolls created during the late 19th century were infested with these “subtleties.” They were created under a racial regime that allowed racial fantasies to be expressed through doll play.

For this paper I will examine the early 20th century black doll on the timeline of the creation of the National Negro Doll Company. I will study the types of dolls

that were manufactured before the founding of the NNDC, compared to the types of dolls that were created afterwards. I will also compare the ways black dolls were manufactured to the way white dolls were manufactured at this time. To do this, I will use advertisements and images from newspaper articles to speak to the types of imagery circulating during the early 20th century. In studying the black doll in this way I will be able to prove the black doll's role as a metaphor for the black body and the power the black doll held in validating and solidifying a Jim Crow racial hierarchy.

This paper will be broken down into two chapters. The first chapter will discuss the black doll under Jim Crow. It will break down the black doll by looking at the individual features of the doll and the way each was intentionally designed to reinforce Jim Crow racial ideologies. The chapter will understand these dolls in context with other types of imagery that was also circulating at the time of their production. Chapter two will examine the black doll after the creation of the National Negro Doll Company in 1911. It will provide a history of the company and the reasons for its creation. It will also speak to the company's contribution towards a larger movement surrounding black racial advancement. At this point, the chapter will speak to the company's contribution to the larger political climate of the time. It will understand the company in context with the political debates that were also occurring, debates between prominent black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. These political figures recognized the power black dolls held and found means of addressing them, to varying degrees, within each of their political platforms. In studying the black doll through a larger political lens, we

gain insight as to the significance the black doll held and its role as a metaphor for the black body. The following introduction will clarify the meaning of certain terms and phrases that will be used over the course of this paper.

The National Negro Doll Company was created in 1911 as an effort to counteract the racial imagery that pervaded material culture in the early 20th century. Before the creation of the NNDC, material culture reinforced a process of social othering that ostracized the black body. American culture has “used dolls to transport and mutilate racial sentiments”¹ from the slavery era to the early 20th century. The black doll should be understood during the course of this paper as a visual manifestation of racial prejudice. The National Negro Doll Company was created as a response to this prejudice. The NNDC worked to offer an alternative to the black dolls that had been manufactured previously, since many perpetuated a racial order similar to the one in place during slavery.

The black doll was used as a means of preserving whiteness and transmitting it into the early 20th century. Constructed whiteness should be understood throughout the course of this paper as the “privileged social, political, and economic position held principally by Anglo Americans.”² This whiteness becomes even more powerful when understood in context to the Jim Crow south. The Jim Crow laws, created in the 1880s, legalized the segregation between blacks and whites in public spaces. These laws were built on the fictional idea that blacks and whites “were separate biological races”³ and that federal laws needed to reflect this biological

¹ Yates, Eleanor Lee. "More Than Child's Play." *Black Issues In Higher Education* (2004): 34

² Martin, 137.

³ Martin, 138.

difference. These laws also say something about the pervasiveness of Anglo-American racism, even up until the early 20th century. Jim Crow was used as a technique in maintaining Anglo-American racism (and the constructed whiteness within that) on a daily, societal level. Dolls can be understood as markers of this racist ideology, in “transporting... racial sentiments”⁴ from the slavery era to the early 20th century. Many late 19th- and early 20th century children “read books about slavery and used dolls to act out scenes of racialized violence and forced labor.”⁵ However, it wasn’t only the books that presented children with these racist ideologies, it was also characteristics of the dolls themselves, which condoned this violence in its physical and material makeup.

The black dolls created under the Jim Crow racial order constructed the black body in a way that condoned and strengthened the white racial innocence. White racial innocence is “characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings and hide them under claims of holy obliviousness.”⁶ In other words, white racial innocence preys upon society’s acceptance of the idea that children simply don’t know what they are saying. They are unknowing, and because of that, they provide “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.”⁷ Black dolls contribute to the construction of this innocence by validating the image of the bafoonish, stupid and inferior black character.

⁴ Yates, 34.

⁵ Bernstein, Robin. "Children's Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; Or, The Possibility of Children's Literature." *Theories and Methodologies* (2011), 160.

⁶ Bernstein, 8.

⁷ Bernstein, 8.

Even well into the mid-1900s, the nature of these black dolls' (their name, dress and physicality) was "an indicator of our nation's comfortableness with the role of Blacks as servants to its White citizenry, and perhaps the comfort level of some Blacks with themselves as servants."⁸ The dolls not only emulate the imagined black person, but advance these emulations within a black persons psyche as well. They cause one to question themselves and their individual potential. In this way, the dolls serve a role much greater than just mimicking the common stereotypical assumptions of black people of the late 19th century. In representing a person through a toy like a doll, it is almost impossible to not subconsciously associate the representations of that doll to the person or type of people they are emulating. As a result, along with the implied social status of a doll's occupation, there is also an implied evaluation of one's self worth as a black person. The doll becomes a metaphor for transmitting certain racial concepts about the place of the black body in society.

⁸ Thomas, Sabrina Lynette. "Sara Lee: The Rise and Fall of the Ultimate Negro Doll." *Transforming Anthropology* 15.1 (2007), 38.

Chapter 1:

The Placement of the Black Doll in a Jim Crow Racial Order

Under Jim Crow, black dolls transmitted notions about the place of the black body in American society. The use of racialized dolls, like Mamie figurines and Topsy-Turvy dolls, and their advertisements were created to reinforce and preserve segregation in the South. Their advertisements highlighted this racialization, especially in the descriptions, names and fabrics used in tandem with the dolls. These racial depictions not only reflected the racial hierarchies of the slavery era, but also condoned them. They allowed for the stereotypes and ideologies that were present during slavery to be carried into the 20th century, and then absorbed by racial movements like the Jim Crow laws.

The use of black dolls as markers of slavery's racial ideologies can be seen when examining a black doll's racial history. It wasn't until 1911 that initiatives were taken to facilitate black manufacturing of these dolls. As a result, all of the dolls made before 1911 were designed and marketed by white manufacturers. Many of these manufacturers are some of the most well known retailers today. Sears was one of these manufactures. Sears was one of the largest sellers of dolls in the country and contributed to the Jim Crow racial climate by advertising its black dolls "with derogatory names, descriptions, [and] antebellum clothing."⁹ All-white control of the black doll enterprise had several implications, especially when looking at the racial timeline on which these black dolls were being produced.

⁹ Martin, 147.

Black manufactured dolls began being produced during the mid-to-late 19th century, a time when slavery was the driving economic, social and political force in America. These dolls were designed solely by white men, and were done so with the intent that they would be purchased by white families and played with by white children. This type of manufacturing makes sense when looking at the lampoonish manner by which black people were depicted across material culture. If anything, these black dolls only reinforced black racial hatred. The racism infused into the black doll mimicked the sentiments of the slavery era.

The dolls were designed to portray black men and women as objects of absurdity. They depicted black people through lampoonist figurines, with exaggerated features and racialized dress that reflected their subordinate positions. One such figurine common to the late 19th century was the Mammy doll. Mammy dolls were racially iconographic in their role in domestic labor. They were often smiling with big bulging eyes, and dressed in matronly attire, bearing a long dress, with a white apron and rag tied around their head. The Mammy was a concept introduced in early 19th century literature and gradually became incorporated into material culture and entertainment. With time however, the term “Mammy” transformed “into a derogatory term directed at Black women.”¹⁰ The Mammy image gained the most fame during the 1850s after the success of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The imagined concept of the Mammy based itself on “the myth of the faithful slave... created to soothe the minds of Whites over the injustices

¹⁰ Martin, Anthony. "Toys with Professions: Racialized Black Dolls, 1850-1940." *Journal of African Diaspora Archeology & Heritage* 3.2 (2014), 149.

African Americans have endured over the centuries.”¹¹ The Mammy doll created an imagined black person that was jolly and loyal. The Mammy doll builds upon the idea that black people enjoy their subordinate roles, that they accept their oppression and racial status. This is also one of the reasons why these types of dolls were solely marketed to white children. The dolls gave the Jim Crow laws validity. They visually confirmed the racial stereotypes circulating on a daily basis. In this way, the dolls were used “to support or subvert racial ideologies”¹² of the Jim Crow era as well as those present during slavery. They served this role through their dress, implied occupation and exaggerated characteristics. Dolls like these “raised slavery’s most foundational, disturbing, and lingering question: what is a person?”¹³

The name, occupation and dress of black dolls were smeared with racial meaning. Even the material used to make these black dolls (usually of cloth and cotton), allowed them to be beaten and to be thrown around without them being completely destroyed. The decision to use this type of material was done intentionally. Doll manufacturers “invited enactments of racial violence when they made black dolls of materials that could withstand rough usage.”¹⁴ White manufacturers created these black dolls with the intent for their use in racial play. In fact, nineteenth-century doll manufacturers “made black dolls of materials, especially rubber and cloth, that could withstand rough usage that would destroy dolls of ceramic or wax,”¹⁵ which were materials often used to make white dolls. The

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Martin, 145.

¹³ Bernstein, 163.

¹⁴ Bernstein, 164.

¹⁵ Ibid.

type of material used for black dolls indicates that the intended use of black dolls was for violent play. This was something prompted by white manufacturers, and was angled at the expense of the black doll. The features of the black doll vary greatly from the fragile ceramic and porcelain dolls used to depict white children at the time, dolls that would shatter if not handled in a delicate manner.

The difference in the manner of play between white and black dolls was so powerful that it “could aid children in internalizing a particular racial consciousness of the dominant society.”¹⁶ For white and black children alike, this meant a justification of a Jim Crow racialized order. The black doll a representation of the black person, and since “representational play is performative in that it produces culture,”¹⁷ the black doll informed how culture was constructed and how people interpreted their racial status. In the minds of black children, the dolls confirmed their roles in subordinate positions. For white children, the image and use of the black dolls simply reaffirmed how slavery and Jim Crow society has constructed their whiteness and the privileges that went along with that.

A white child’s manner of play with these black dolls not only reinforced the social dynamics they witnessed with Jim Crow, but also created new fantasies that came out during the act of play. Robin Bernstein speaks to this idea by referencing an interview he had with one woman who recounts her experiences as a child when playing with black dolls. This woman describes that she “very soon abstracted the steel chain that held my mother’s bunch of keys, loaded my negro doll with chains,

¹⁶ Martin, 154.

¹⁷ Bernstein, 163.

[and] selected a white doll to act as overseer.”¹⁸ The reason why this woman had decided to engage the dolls in this way is because she had seen that type of dynamic replicated in daily life. In this instance, the girl was merely playing the “house” of the slavery and Jim Crow era. In addition to reinforcing daily racial sentiment, the act of play with these black dolls also created new racial understandings within the minds of many youth. In this instance, the young girl’s play wasn’t only a reflection of racist hierarchy she was surrounded by, but also served as a form of self-teaching, in which “racial and racist fantasies emerged through doll play.”¹⁹ These types of images have the ability to be carried over into adult life as well, and many black people internalized the domestic and laborer roles that were assigned to them while they were growing up.

The black and white dolls created during the late 19th and early 20th centuries were done so in accordance with the same racial order that drove the Jim Crow laws. These dolls served to reinforce and preserve segregation in the South. The dolls manifested these roles through several means. Let’s start with the doll’s name itself. Even up until the early 20th century, one could find black dolls being sold under names like “Darky Nurse” and “Glazed Nigger Baby,” and advertised as such in local advertisements and newspapers. Image 1 displays a black doll from



¹⁸ Bernstein, 162

¹⁹ Ipid.

Figure 1

a 1903 catalog advertisement. If one were to disregard the image presented along with the caption, an automatic assumption can be made about that doll's significance and corresponding race. Names are powerful in contextualizing an image. The name "Darky Dude" eliminates any type of individual identity for the doll and simply groups it into an un-personal and general category of blackness. In contrast, Image 2 depicts a common advertisement for a white doll manufactured at this time. In just looking at the white doll's name itself ("Mary Jane"), the doll is

assigned an identity. She has a name, and because of that she is given a certain level of respect and purpose that a doll without a proper name, like "Darky Dude," is not given. The striking difference in the names ascribed to black and white dolls implies a



Figure 2

status difference reflective of the racialized social order of the time.

The names given to many advertised black dolls of the time not only instill incredible racial connotations, but also tell us something about the occupation that goes along with their ascribed social status. It is important to note that this implied occupation is not one created specifically for the doll, but is one directed by common black-held occupations relative to the Jim Crow era. These occupations are not just reflective of one's class but also one's race. In a Jim Crow era, class and race had

incredible overlaps, something reflected in the way black dolls were named and dressed. If the doll was black, it was assumed that it was also poor, and was assigned names and occupations that corresponded to that status. The name “Darky Nurse,” for example, makes obvious the doll’s occupation as a housemaid, an occupation common to black men and women especially in the early 20th century. It is also an occupation filled with a racial history. In the slavery era, the house slave was a position common to the Antebellum South. Fast-forwarding only a few years to the early 20th century, even though a black woman’s role in a white home wasn’t definitively forced labor, it still represented a grand lack of opportunities for social advancement. Advertisements of black dolls with these types of roles fixed black children into a designated (and limited) frame of occupational potential.

A doll’s style of dress is important to consider when placing these dolls in context with the Jim Crow racial order. The manner in which these black dolls were dressed served to reinforce the dolls occupation (as seen in the name), but also done to instill further sentiments of racial inferiority. A black doll’s outfit, often similar to that of the Mammy doll, was often made of rags or thin cotton, while white doll’s outfits resembled detailed stitch work and fine quality materials, like ribbons. The use of doll’s (and other forms of material culture) to insinuate certain racial connotations represents an effort by whites to protect the power of their whiteness. They use dolls and the power of consumer culture in a way that attempts to forge the stereotypes of the black body that was reproduced in the public sphere and infuse it into the interworking’s of the private sphere, like the family household. The power these dolls held meant that even if “a parent did not purchase the dolls with

the intention of perpetuating racial stereotypes, they were participating in symbolic domination and creating the potential of imprinting this imaginary of African Americans into the minds of the young.”²⁰ Whether intentional or not, the infusion of certain racial ideologies into the minds of children greatly bolstered the racial myths surrounding the Jim Crow hierarchy, and thus legitimized the hierarchy itself.

This is why we see many black families of the early 20th century, carefully screening the products coming into their homes and why many (up until the creation of the National Negro Doll Company) made their own dolls for their children. Black parents recognized the racial undertones within these dolls, which is why they made efforts to counteract negative representations of the black body (like the black doll of the late 19th century). One of the ways parents would do this was by “dressing up” a certain way in public as a means of rejecting the racial suggestions that permeated material culture. Black parents did this in order to present “a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body and [to] reinforce a sense of dignity that was perpetually assaulted”²¹ by consumer culture.

Throughout the Jim Crow era, a recurring theme of black children and laughable violence was infused into material culture. Black dolls are an example of this violently racial humor, where “even moments of jarring violence are remembered as a charming encounter with a pickaninny.”²² The Jim Crow laws were based on a non-acknowledgement of black pain as real pain, but instead based on

²⁰ Martin, 154.

²¹ Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free, (1994), 50.

²² Nyong'o, Tavia. *Racial Kitsch and Black Performance*. Vol. 15. Johns Hopkins UP. (2002), 378.

the understanding of black pain as a source of hilarity. The humor behind this black pain is an example of racial kitsch. Racial kitsch can be found in much of late 19th and early 20th century consumer culture.

Racial kitsch aligns black images with a culture of violence and understands that violence in an ironic and amusing manner. Racial kitsch is “linked to and a product of, white imagination” and creates an imagined violence that acts as a form of “visual terrorism.”²³ The imagined violence is allowed to take place because it creates a racial simile that assumes the skin of the black person is “not skin at all, but a mask, with perhaps nothing behind it.”²⁴ It was permissible for the black person to be in pain because black people weren’t people anyways. In fact, it was understood that black people actually enjoyed their pain, that they enjoyed their enslavement. This is something that can be seen by the design of many black dolls at this time. Many were created in line with the Mammy doll imagery of a jolly, ignorant and happily submissive black person. They were made with smiles on their faces to reflect this willing obedience. The idea of racial kitsch builds on this concept of the jolly and loyal black person (the image often fronted in material culture and entertainment), which provides whites with an alibi for their imposed racial violence. However, racial kitsch is something that can be seen beyond just dolls themselves.

The slavery era presented the black body in a certain way and the black doll was used to visually transmit this racism into the 20th century. Circulating images of black people as vile, laughable, and caricature looking figures was a technique used

²³ Nyong'o, 372.

²⁴ Nyong'o, 377.

by whites to legitimize a Jim Crow racial order. However, black dolls weren't the only transmitters of these sentiments. Pejoratively racial images were reproduced and spread across all areas of material culture as well, and racial kitsch was something inherently linked to these images.

Image 3 depicts the front cover of a late-19th century box of firecrackers. The Mammy caricature presented here reflects the violent and caricature-like ways in which the black body was often represented. In this image, the black women's body is barbarically exploding, her limbs detaching from the rest of her body. What's more, her facial expression indicates that she is in a considerable amount of pain. Despite this gruesome and violent suggestion, this advertisement was created under the assumption that consumers would not only find it acceptable, but enticing. Advertisements like these contribute to a definition around racial violence as something permissible and amusing. This advertisement was created under the assumption that consumers would be so enthralled and humored by the image that they would feel the need to buy the product. In this way, the Mammy's pain in this image was meant to amuse its audience, to attract customers. In understanding the advertisement of Image 3, we learn that these types of violent images were not only accepted during this time, but were actually understood in a positive light. Black pain was hysterical, not only in this advertisement but in the Jim Crow South in general. Advertisements like these are reflections of what was accepted during the post-slavery era and provide insight as to why the Jim Crow laws were able to exist.

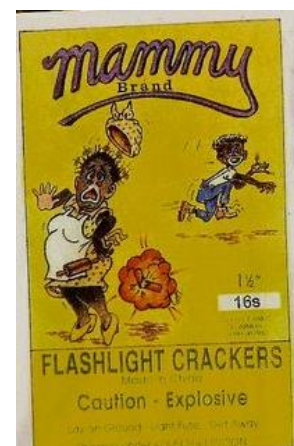


Figure 3

Let's look at other ways in which the black body was presented during the slavery era. Image 4 shows an advertisement from 1783 for "Pears' Soap." The heading on the top of this advertisement reads "I have found Pears' Soap matchless for the Needs and Complexion." This quote is then followed by an image of a black boy before and after using the soap. In the first image, before he has been bathed, the boy is black. The second image shows the boy again, but this time he has white skin. The implication here is that Pears' Soap is desirable because it can make even the dirtiest and most undesirable of things (like the black person) clean, and white.



Figure 4

that it is not only undesirable but also unwelcome. This not only demonstrates the type of imagery circulating at the time, but also explains the extent to which blatant and overt racism was understood as acceptable in dominant culture. The fact that this advertisement was designed, marketed, and distributed in publications across American media speaks to the level of comfort that early 20th century Americans had with this kind of imagery.

The racial suggestions like the ones taking place within the Pear's Soap advertisement were incredibly commonplace to early 20th century publications.

This advertisement is not only associating filth with blackness, but is also defining this filth as something that (in this case, literally) needs to be washed away. It tells its audience that blackness needs to be disposed of, and

This not only tells us that racial bigotry was accepted and embraced, but that it was actually used as a means of promotion. Customers were truly drawn to products that included racial symbolism angled at the expense of the black person. This type of racial climate pervaded the market during the slavery era and set the undertones for how black manufactured dolls would be portrayed in the later part of the 19th century. Black dolls of the late 19th and early 20th century were manufactured under this racist regime, and as such, aligned with the other types of racialized products that were also being designed and advertised at the time.

The racialization of the black dolls validated the racial hierarchies present during slavery and assigned those hierarchies some level of truth. Black dolls are examples of the types of visual manifestations that allowed the stereotypes of the slavery era to infuse itself into the 20th century, through racial movements like Jim Crow. In this way, dolls acted as a ticket in transferring the racial ideologies of the pre-Civil war era into the minds of the early 20th century youth.

Chapter 2:

The Shift to Black Manufacturing *H.R. Boyd and The National Negro Doll Company*

People contested the Jim Crow order in many ways. One of which was through an alternative production of material culture. In 1911, H.R. Boyd founded the National Negro Doll Company (NNDC). This creation marked the first institutional challenge of the black doll enterprise. No longer were black dolls made solely in the hands of white men. With the creation of the NNDC, black dolls were designed and manufactured by other black men and women. This gave black manufacturers tremendous power. They could now create black dolls in the way they saw fit. Their intent was to create a black doll in a way that represented the true black body, free from racial connotations.

H.R. Boyd created the NNDC as a means of rejecting both the Jim Crow laws and the slavery-era racial understandings that constructed them. H.R. Boyd was born as a slave in 1843. Over the course of his life, Boyd founded the Boyd Publishing Corporation and the Citizens Savings Bank & Trust Company. He worked to organize churches for freed black men in the South and founded the National Baptist Congress Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress. Boyd worked tirelessly to promote black racial advancement, founding companies in an effort to mobilize the southern black population. The National Negro Doll Company was one of these efforts. Boyd created the doll company because he saw a hole that needed to be filled within consumer culture. Material culture of the late 19th and early 20th

century was infested with bafoonish, racist and hateful depictions of black people. What made matters worse was that there were no alternatives to these representations, since whites dominated the material culture industry. Boyd took it upon himself to generate an alternative to white-manufactured products. In creating this alternative, Boyd simultaneously rejected white-manufactured depictions.

Boyd chose the black doll because he found it to be the most direct means of “instilling racial pride and self respect”²⁵ in black youth. Boyd angled this initiative at a children’s toy because he believed that racial ideologies were created and reproduced with each succeeding generation. Boyd hoped that by addressing and redefining racial pride within children, he would shape a new generation of black people that carried positive self-perceptions. Boyd saw this as the best means to promote black racial advancement.

Regardless of the reasoning, for the first time, black dolls were created with an intention to represent the true black man and woman, free from the racial connotations and stereotypes that had been sewn into the fabric of black dolls previously. And even though there were still white manufacturers continuing to produce their racialized and lampoonish images of the black body in material culture, the presence (as small as it might have been) of this black manufacturing, had a significant impact on the types of black dolls that were produced. Boyd not only redefined the doll industry, but the production of material culture as well.

The black dolls created by the NNDC were designed with the intent to provide a black child with an alternative to the images already circulating across

²⁵ Koba. "Former Slave Creates The First Black Doll for His Daughters, Here's Why." *Urban Intellectuals*. 17 Jan. 2016. Web.

material culture. The NNDC black dolls were dolls that black children could actually identify with because they reflected a true black body, and encouraged the black child's identity to form under positive connotations. The NNDC designed these black dolls with a goal of instilling black racial pride and positive self-understandings among black youths. In serving this role, black dolls also posed a challenge to the Jim Crow hierarchy by offering a replacement to material culture's racial order. Instead of the incredibly violent and overtly racist caricatures created by white manufactures, the black dolls of the NNDC were created with favorable and more human-like characteristics. They were created to represent a respectable black body instead of a laughable caricature.

Image 5 is a photograph of one of the NNDC's first manufactured black dolls. This photograph was advertised in a newspaper article in 1911 and serves as an example for the types of images Boyd was attempting to circulate across consumer culture. This doll is finely dressed, with lace and ribbons in both her clothing and her hair. The doll also seems to be made out of a more delicate, porcelain-like material, something quite different from the rubber and cloth destructible material that had been used to make black dolls by white manufacturers. Details like these demonstrate a different intended use for the doll.

This black doll is not smiling. This was a manufacturing technique done intentionally to regret the idea of the jolly black person, and the idea that black men and women are willingly and happily subservient. Essentially, the lack of smile on this doll is



Figure 5

done in an effort to discredit the types of ideologies that were the epitome of the black Mammy doll.

Since the National Negro Doll Company was the first doll company to initiate the manufacturing of black dolls, there weren't many materials available in America to create the exterior features of the dolls. Nor were there many companies willing to accommodate a black-run company. As a result, during the first years of its operation, the NNDC imported pieces of black dolls from Europe. As time progressed, Boyd was able to open up his own manufacturing factory in America. The NNDC became well known just in the first few years after it was founded. It gained this recognition because of the means by which it attempted to confront the Jim Crow laws.

The black dolls of the NNDC posed a threat to the Jim Crow hierarchy. They served this role through several means. The NNDC doll represented the black person as someone to be respected. It portrayed the black child just as white dolls of the time portrayed white children. This was threatening to the Jim Crow racial order because Jim Crow based itself on the belief that blacks and whites were biologically different. In giving respect to the black doll, you're simultaneously giving respect to the black body. And since Jim Crow is only able to exist under the understanding that black people are biologically inferior, anything that defines the black body differently poses a threat to Jim Crow. In other words, when the black body is given respect, Jim Crow is dissolved of meaning. The NNDC also contested Jim Crow by promoting its goals of instilling racial pride. The company did this through use of

advertisements. The NNDC advertised its dolls in publications like the *Nashville Globe*, *The Crisis*, and Boyd's Sunday School publications.

The significance that black dolls hold in their reflection of racial discourse can also be seen in the attention put on them by prominent political figures. Throughout the early 20th century, black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington made an extra effort to help guide the production and marketing of black dolls throughout the country and abroad. These leaders not only recognized the importance material culture holds in the circulation of racial concepts, but also singled out black dolls as having a particular importance within the broad spectrum of material culture.

Although W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington varied pretty greatly in terms of their political convictions, all three sought the same goal. That goal being: the collective social, political and economic advancement of the black race. Black racial advancement was something agreed upon by all three leaders as something absolutely necessary. And since each leader understood this goal with the same degree of importance, their differences in the means to attain this goal led to large amounts of conflict and debates between them.

W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the first participants of the black doll enterprise, publishing several of the National Negro Doll Company's advertisements within his magazine, *The Crisis*. W.E.B. Du Bois created this magazine in 1910 with the intention of pursuing "the world-old dream of human brotherhood' by bearing witness to 'the danger of race prejudice' and reporting on 'the great problem of

inter-racial relations,' both at home and abroad."²⁶ This mission was also similar to that of the NAACP's, an organization that used *The Crisis* in particular to promote many of its ideas surrounding black racial advancement.

Du Bois' involvement and leading role in the movement towards black racial advancement was one that differed greatly from his political counterparts. Du Bois' political stances can be outlined by three principle arguments. The first is Du Bois' proposal for immediate action, something he terms "immideatism." He believes black people must act now or remain complicit and continue to be reduced to a status of inferiority and second class citizenship. He believes this to be why they must "Shout, O children! Shout, you're free! For God has bought your liberty!"²⁷ Du Bois believes that without action, no progress will be made.

The second argument key to Du Bois' political convictions is his assertion that availability to sufficient education (and higher education specifically) is necessary in order to fight for the societal advancement African Americans were seeking at this time. Du Bois believes that the lack of quality instruction, resources, and elite institutions common for black people in the early 20th century, are things that hinder their quest for equality. Du Bois believes the black race must develop their minds in a way that allows them to make the best possible argument for their rights.

The third argument Du Bois deems crucial towards black societal progression is his belief that in order to collectively reverse their subordinate

²⁶ "The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races." *Modernist Journals Project*. Brown University and the University of Tulsa. Web.

²⁷ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1961. Print.

status, they must address the social problems driving this racialized order. Du Bois describes this racialized order as one where “the sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair.”²⁸ This shadow, no doubt, represents the recurrent prejudices and social injustices that loom over black men and women on a daily basis. For Du Bois, without addressing the racialization of daily social encounters, a fight for social advancement is arguably meaningless. Rather, in order to make their fight an effective one, they must utilize the power of voting. Du Bois argues that in doing so, they take advantage of what limited opportunities are afforded to them. He explains it as the only thing that separates the black race from “a second slavery.” In other words, Du Bois argues that they must vote themselves into a new way of life.

During the early 20th century, Du Bois actually argued, “the black middle class were being seduced by the material privilege that was associated with their positions, and that this was a distraction from their quest for racial improvement.”²⁹ Considering this, it is difficult to find reason in Du Bois’ support and publication of products of material culture (like the National Negro Doll Company’s black dolls). Du Bois allowed several issues of *The Crisis* to advertise these black dolls, products he deemed detrimental to objectives of racial improvement. At a time wrought with racialized political turmoil, it seems unlikely and inconsistent for Du Bois to promote any ideology contradictory to his own.

These types of decisions become evermore interesting when taking into account the timing of the publication of these advertisements. Du Bois advertised

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Wilkie, Laurie A. *The Archaeology of Mothering: An African-American Midwife's Tale*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 109.

these black dolls in only three of its issues, in July, August and September of 1911. Out of their 106 years of publishing and circulating *The Crisis* (which is still published today), 1911 was the only year Du Bois agreed to have Boyd's dolls advertised in his work. 1911 was also only one year after *The Crisis* published its first issue. In addition to the fact that the youth of the magazine meant that it wasn't yet well known amongst even many black readers, its goals of exposing "the danger of race prejudice" and reporting on "the great problem of inter-racial relations," certainly didn't attract many possible white readers. Moreover, with a mission to correct "the racial stereotypes and silences of the mainstream press,"³⁰ *The Crisis* almost repelled all those who weren't black or who weren't supporters of Du Bois' political objectives. As a result, it is quite unlikely that *The Crisis* received much financial support during the first few years of its circulation. With a greater need for monetary resources within those first couple years, Du Bois dangerously decided to market for a company that didn't align with his political agenda in order to ensure that his magazine remained financially viable.

Black dolls speak to a bigger issue of raciality within early 20th century America. Like other political figures, Du Bois recognized the importance these dolls held within society at large and its role within a constructed racialized order. Even though Du Bois' political convictions stood against the manufacturing and distribution of black dolls (despite certain actions that could argue otherwise), the fact of Du Bois' recognition of the significance these dolls held, speaks to their grandeur significance. Black dolls and the methods of play associated with them are

³⁰ "The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races." *Modernist Journals Project*. Brown University and the University of Tulsa. Web.

“metaphors for the pleasures and politics of black communities under segregation”³¹ and thus worth consideration in the fight towards racial advancement. By eliminating the metaphors that drove racial orders like segregation, political leaders took another step closer towards removing the hierarchy all together.

Booker T. Washington’s approach of black racial advancement differed greatly from that of Du Bois and Garvey. Taking almost the opposite approach as Du Bois’ immediateist angle, Washington believed that black people would achieve racial equality through patience and accommodation. This appease-whites approach is one that “urged blacks to accept discrimination for the time being and concentrate on elevating themselves through hard work and material prosperity.”³² Not surprisingly, debates between Du Bois and Washington were often highly contested.

Washington’s accommodative and pacifist approach was emphasized in his 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech, where he addresses the importance black people held in maintaining a positive relationship with the South. Washington explains that since the “commercial world” was built on the Southern economy, a friendly rapport with them is needed in order to become economically prosperous and move into new social strata. In this proposed compromise, Washington uses the phrase “cast down your bucket”³³ to explain his request to whites to make certain economic opportunities available for the accommodating black people. Washington believes

³¹ Kelley, 35.

³² "Booker T. & W.E.B." *Frontline PBS*. PBS. Web.

³³ Washington, Booker T. *1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech*. 18 Sept. 1895.

that if both races work together, blacks would be better “prepared [to] exercise [the] privileges”³⁴ that come along with social equality.

Du Bois would likely argue Washington’s compromise to be one that is undeniably tailored towards whites and that it is one that accepts and reaffirms the racialized order that advocates of racial advancement had been trying to eradicate.

Although there has been no documented involvement regarding Washington and black dolls during the early 20th century (largely due to the fact that Washington was very near the end of his life when mass-produced black dolls had just gone onto the market), we can likely assume what his impression of black dolls would have been. One of the reasons why political leaders were so invested in the manufacturing of black dolls (outside of their roles as conduits of certain racial understandings) was their place as a source of black economic power. Black manufacturing itself served a crucial role in black racial advancement, and a structural element to Marcus Garvey’s principle arguments. Economic power was also something emphasized by Washington, who “stressed education in crafts, industrial and farming skills”³⁵ in order to advance their economic status. Considering this, it is likely that Washington would be supportive of the manufacturing of black dolls, so long as it didn’t threaten a positive relationship with the white South. And more specifically, one can assume that Washington’s support would probably be more focused around the doll’s role as a symbol of black economic enterprise, as opposed to its role in reversing racial prejudices

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ “Booker T. & W.E.B.” *Frontline PBS*. PBS. Web.

(considering the threat that could hold to whites and their maintenance of white racial innocence).

If Washington were to look at the advertisements for the National Negro Doll Company, like those published in *Nashville Globe* in 1911, he would likely have a very different impression of them than Du Bois and Garvey might. Washington would likely look at white-appeasing comments like “the refined Negro of today” and believe it to be useful in attempts to win the respect of whites. He might see it as an advantageous technique to sway white approval in both the publication of this advertisement and of the manufacturing of black dolls as well. Marcus Garvey, on the other hand, would likely have a very different impression of the advertisement. He would probably think it to be useless in the first place, since for him, any initiatives in America are hopeless to begin with.

In addition to his roles as an international movement leader and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), Marcus Garvey also played a major role within the black doll enterprise. Jamaican-born Garvey recognized the value that material culture held in society, and more specifically, the black dolls’ role in swaying either the reinforcement or the reversal of certain racial stereotypes or perceptions. Because of this recognition, Garvey initiated his own objectives to address the issue of the doll’s role as a symbol of racial discourse during the early 20th century.

Although Boyd was the “first to market mass-produced dolls to African American consumers,” “Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association are often credited with popularizing black dolls in the years following

World War I.”³⁶ One of the reasons why Garvey took a special interest in black dolls was because of his larger argument regarding the importance of black economic self-sufficiency. Garvey believed that “Black people had to develop their own business base if the race was to move ahead economically and socially.”³⁷ In tandem with this thought process, Garvey founded the Negro Factories Corporation (NFC) in 1919, and along with it: a black doll factory.

This black doll factory was created along side other manufacturing initiatives of the NFC, some of which included: Universal Laundries, Universal Restaurants and a Universal Grocery Store. Garvey’s goal was to have a black store in every possible domain he could. This goal was based on his belief that “A race that is solely dependent upon another for its economic existence sooner or later dies.”³⁸ As such, Garvey sought to ignite black racial advancement through economic means. He created a black store for every white one created, in the hopes that if met by a similar economic force, that white superiority would crumble. Garvey tunneled most of these economic pursuits through The Black Star Line (BSL), the backbone of his international enterprises. BSL was created to support the UNIA and carry its shipments to international locations, thereby broadening Garvey’s products (and therefore, his influence) on a global scale.

Garvey’s perceptions on how to address black racial advancement varied greatly from that of Du Bois and Booker T Washington. To start, Garvey was an avid

³⁶ Mjagkij, Nina. *Portraits of African American Life since 1865*. (Scholarly Resources, 2003), 65.

³⁷ Rogoff, E. G., Trinkaus, J., & Puryear, A. N. Perhaps the Times Have Not Yet Caught Up to Marcus Garvey, An Early Champion of Ethnic Entrepreneurship. (*Journal of Small Business Management*, 1998). 68.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Pan-Africanist, believing that a fight for racial advancement in America was next to hopeless. Garvey thought that instead, black people around the world should make a collective return back to their homeland, something he termed the “Back to Africa Movement.” Du Bois and Washington however, believed a collective return to Africa would mean an abandonment of the racial issues in America. As a result, Du Bois and Washington advocated for racial advancement that centered on issues that could be addressed here (in America), like the racial preludes to consumer culture.

The power that black dolls hold in the development and continuation of certain racial ideologies is evident simply by looking at the attention brought to them by influential political leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey. The production of racialized dolls in the early 20th century worked to maintain the power of whiteness and white racial innocence. A black doll’s name, clothing and material implied a certain racialized order that was mirrored and sustained in the race-based culture of the early 20th century. H.R. Boyd created black dolls with the intention to offer an alternative to this racialized order. This can be seen by the advertising techniques Boyd decided to employ, techniques that didn’t always seem to align with the political stances declared by certain leaders of the time.

In *The Crisis*' September Issue of 1911, Du Bois allowed H.R. Boyd to publicize an advertisement for his company's (The National Negro Doll Company) black dolls. In this advertisement (as pictured in image 5), Boyd markets his company in a way that appeases white racial innocence. As defined earlier, white racial innocence centers of the notion that white children are able to pass through assertions of racist behavior under the assumption that these white children simply didn't know better. This idea of racial innocence is something that is not only used an excuse for white children but also for white adults. The advertisement that Boyd creates for this magazine not only accepts this idea of white racial innocence, but actually uses it as a technique in his advertising efforts as well. Boyd asserts, "The Negro doll is calculated to help in the Christian development of our race." Here, Boyd references the use of dolls as a form of the "Christian development" of the black race. This reference not only accepts the idea that a certain development of the race is needed, but also asserts a framework for this development as a "Christian" development. For a white reader, the reference to Christianity would undoubtedly make the advertisement one that was more acceptable. This is because the Jim Crow era was a time when black people were already dubbed un-American and sub-human. It was also a time when Christianity was America's dominant and most highly respected religion. The use of

Give the Child a Doll

The Most Beautiful of All the Toys on the Market Are the
NEGRO DOLLS

☞ YOUR child would be happy if it had a Negro doll such as are sent out by the National Negro Doll Company, Nashville, Tennessee. Every race is trying to teach their children an object lesson by giving them toys that will lead to higher intellectual heights. The Negro doll is calculated to help in the Christian development of our race. All dolls are sent by express, charges paid.

DOLLS FOR THE SEASON 1911-1912 NOW READY

Prices from **50c.** up to **\$8.50**

For Illustrated Booklets, Prices and Other Information, Send Five Cents to the
National Negro Doll Company
519 Second Avenue N., Nashville, Tenn.

R. H. BOYD, President H. A. BOYD, Manager

“Christian development” within this advertisement is used to appeal to white readers in greater numbers than it would have if the reference to “Christianity” were not present.

Boyd created advertisements similar to those published in *The Crisis*, ones that were also written to appease white readers. One of these advertisements appeared in the *Nashville Globe*, where Boyd explained that his dolls seek to “represent the refined Negro of today.” By qualifying the “Negro of today” as only now being refined, it also implies that at one point in history, black people were not refined. It is as if Boyd assigns some level of truth to the prejudicial conception that black people were at one point, uncivilized and unsophisticated. Even though the advertisement is saying that they have now progressed and no longer represent an uncivilized and sub-human entity, it still accepts it as something that was once true. Once again, Boyd uses a technique to appease white readers. The advertisement accepts previous notions of subservience in order to promote the idea that the “refined Negro” doesn’t threaten the Jim Crow racialized order. While doing this, the advertisement attempts to simultaneously persuade whites in a “nonthreatening” way that the black race is worth respect and that it should be considered a “refined” and dignified race. In other words, the “refined negro” is a concept that can be more easily accepted by whites if it’s prefaced with an acknowledgement of their subordinate status.

Boyd’s decision to continually promote his dolls through white-pleasing advertisements is something that eventually led to the downfall of his company. In 1915, the National Negro Doll Company went out of business. Although there is little

documentation on the reasoning for the company's collapse, we can likely attribute it to a couple of things. The NNDC promoted two opposite sets of phenomenon. The company sought black racial advancement through an alternative production of material culture, something that presents the company in a radical and rebellious way. In the first couple years of its operation, the NNDC received the acknowledgement it did because it presented a black doll that had never been seen before. Moreover, it presented an assault against material culture that had never been seen before. However, the way Boyd advertised the company in newspaper articles and magazines presented something different. The advertisements reflected a company that wasn't rebellious against the Jim Crow racial order at all, but rather was one that gave into it. The company abandoned its approach to addressing black racial pride, and instead succumbed to what white people wanted to hear. This back and forth between two strikingly different sets of ideas is likely the reason for the company's collapse in 1915.

The racial imagery many black dolls evoked was so powerful they often created a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which black children assumed they wouldn't be able to achieve anything other than subordinancy, so they simply didn't try. Political leaders took a particular interest in black dolls for this reason. As a part of their efforts to advance and mobilize the black population, black leaders looked to change the composition of the black doll. They did this because they recognized the significance the black doll held within material culture. Material culture itself is powerful in that it reflects the sentiments and rationalizations of greater society. Material culture not only reflects these sentiments but also reinforces. Each time

material culture is used, looked at, or played with, the racial imagery associated with the product becomes solidified in our mind. That racial imagery is ascribed value.

The derogatory racialization of pre-NNDC black dolls permeated the minds of black children to the point that the imagined “Negro” represented in the dolls, became internalized within a black child’s mind. The dolls created a black character that was “ugly, dirty, dark, inferior, and poor.”³⁹ Considering this, it makes sense why these types of black dolls were actually intended for white buyers. These black dolls were created, not with the intention as a toy for the black youth, but as a way to instill white children with even greater senses of white racial innocence.

Within material culture, the black doll is of particular interest to black leaders. This can be explained by a few reasons. To start, the black doll was one of the main sources and carriers of the racialized order present during the slavery era. By redefining the black doll, you redefine the racialized order. And since the black doll is a metaphor for the black body, every time a black doll is disrespected; the black body is as well. Political leaders saw the black doll as a quick fix to a timeless problem. Moreover, the black doll is something that specifically affects the black child’s mind. Black children see themselves represented within these dolls. By changing the composition of the black doll, you simultaneously change the mentality of the children looking at them and playing with them.

The black child was offered an alternative the bigotry-driven depictions that dominated the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Black children were able to

³⁹ Martin, 154.

internalize a different racial depiction, and began to understand themselves accordingly. In this way, black children internalized the black dolls of the NNDC just as they internalized the racial depictions of previously made dolls. The black doll of the NNDC offered the white child with an alternative representation of black people as well. A white child was introduced to an institutional challenge to the Jim Crow racial order. It was a challenge that was different than other Civil Rights efforts created at that time because this was one that could directly be understood by children, both black and white. White children were offered an object they used in their daily lives that questioned the racial order they had always known. By suggesting the black body has a place in society other than in a role of subordination, the Jim Crow racial structure is threatened. For the first time, the cycle of Jim Crow had the ability to be broken because children were introduced a new way of thinking about the place of the black body in society.

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