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IN MY OPINION

Blacks can often share blame for poor self-image

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"Can you show me the doll that looks bad?"

The two baby dolls are identical except that one has pale skin, the other is dark. The little black girl, maybe 5 years old, has been holding up the pale doll, but in response to the question, she puts it down and picks up the other.

"Why does that look bad?" the interviewer asks.

"Because it's black," the little girl says.

"And why do you think that's the nice doll?" asks the interviewer, referring to the light-skinned doll.

"Because she's white."

"And can you give me the doll that looks like you?"

The dark-skinned girl reaches for the light-skinned doll, jiggling it as if she really wants to pick it up. In the end, with palpable reluctance, she pushes the black doll forward.

You might be forgiven for thinking you have happened upon one of the "Doll Tests" conducted by Dr. Kenneth Clark beginning in the late 1930s, tests that helped persuade the Supreme Court to strike down segregation in its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

But this is a new doll test, conducted by Kiri Davis, a 17-year-old student from New York, for *A Girl Like Me*, her short film about black girls and standards of beauty. You can see it at www.uthtv.com/umedia/collection/2052/. But be warned: If you have a heart, the new doll test will break it.

Hard upon mourning, though, will come outrage. How is this possible? How can this still be true? How in the hell, a lifetime after a little boy in Arkansas pointed to the black doll and said, "That's a nigger . . . I'm a nigger," can we still have black children who think black and bad are synonymous?

Some of us were born of the generation that came of age with a mandate to hurl that thinking back onto history's trash heap. Some of us remember when James Brown sang *Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud*. Some of us knew that when Aretha Franklin spelled out *Respect*, she wasn't just talking to a feckless lover. Some of us piled Afros high on our heads and sprayed them with Afro Sheen till they shone. Some of us clenched our fists and cried "Black is beautiful" in the face of a nation that had always told us you could be one or the other, but never both.

And for what? So that 40 years later, our children would still parrot media-derived lies of their own worthlessness? What's appalling is that many of the lies now originate with black people themselves.

That's not to let white people off the hook. The simple arithmetic of majority/minority means that under the best of circumstances, a child of color will always see fewer images of people like her in media. And the white makers and gatekeepers of those fewer images have historically weighted them toward ineffectuality, hypersexuality, native criminality and plain ignorance.

What's different now is that African Americans are, themselves, often the makers and gatekeepers. And under our aegis, the images have, in many ways, gotten worse.

To surf the music video channels is to be immersed in black culture as conceived by a new generation, a lionization of pimps and gold diggers, hustlers and thugs who toss the N-word with a gusto that would do the Klan proud.

A new generation, afflicted with historical amnesia, blind indifference and a worship of filthy lucre, dances a metaphoric buck and wing, eyes rolling, yassuh bossing, selling itself out, selling its forebears out. Most of all, selling the children out.

And it's little excuse to say we're only buying lies we have internalized, lies that become self-fulfilling prophecy. That's all well and good, but the moment you're able to understand that you've been lied to is the moment you bear responsibility for promulgating some truth in reply. That too few of us are willing to accept that responsibility is driven home every time one of those black children chooses a white doll.

We've spent 387 years in this country trying to get white folks to love us. Might help if we first learned to love ourselves.