

## Dramaturgias no Teatro de Formas Animadas

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### Creating Communitas: African American Doll Bloggers Animate Black Dolls as Sites of Signification

**Paulette Richards**

E-mail: [paulette.richards3@gmail.com](mailto:paulette.richards3@gmail.com)

Paulette Richards is a puppet artist and independent researcher. She's part of the Board of Directors of UNIMA – Union Internationale de la Marionnette – USA (2020–21).

I am thankful for those who encourage my creativity. I'm thankful for those who read my words and who have kind things to say. I am thankful for those who offer criticism and push me to strive to improve. I am thankful for those who can identify with my struggles. I am thankful for those who laugh at my jokes. I am just so very, very thankful. "Calista's Diary Entry – Thankful Thursday" November 28, 2020. <http://roxannesdolls.blogspot.com/2013/11/calistas-diary-entry-thankful.html> (accessed June 30, 2020)

Young boys like Carroll Spinney who grew up in a time when gender roles were more rigidly defined often heard their interest in puppetry disdainfully dismissed as "doll wiggling." In an interview with *The Huffington Post*, Spinney recalled an incident in grammar school when a group of eighteen boys threatened to beat him up (Duca 2017). He told Jenna Marotta of the *New York Times* "Students in his high school started a rumor that he was gay because he 'played with dolls'" ("Carroll Spinney, Big Bird's Heart and Soul (and Body)" 2015). Small wonder then, that puppetry scholars have tried to maintain a neat distinction between dolls and puppets. Bil Baird states, "A puppet is an inanimate figure that is made to move by human effort before an audience" and insists, "It is definitely not a doll" (*The Art of the Puppet* 13). Both dolls and puppets are figures, but dolls are ostensibly for static display or private play while puppets

are animated in performances before an audience. Furthermore dolls usually represent human figures while puppeteers can animate any object as a character in a narrative that has agency to affect the outcome of the story. When children and adults engage in social doll play, however, the distinction between dolls and puppets blurs. This study therefore explores the work of three African American artists who maintained doll blogs and animated their dolls in short video narratives between 2010 and 2015; Vanessa Morrison, Hey It's Muff, and Roxanne Magee.

Following the inauguration of Barack Obama, the first African American President of the United States in 2009, Mattel released the So in Style dolls, a line of African American fashion dolls presented as Barbie's friends who hailed from Chicago like the President. A community of African American doll enthusiasts coalesced on Blogger where they shared photo stories of quotidian black life featuring ethnic fashion dolls in family gatherings, romantic relationships, and communal celebrations such as weddings. At the same time video streaming technology made it possible for this group of African American women to share their doll play with an international audience.

Girlhood studies as a sub-discipline of gender studies has approached doll play from historical, anthropological, and psychological perspectives (Bernstein 2011, Chin 1999, Forman-Brunell 2012), but none of this research has addressed adult doll collectors let alone adult women of color who not only collect, but also play with dolls. Fandom scholars have examined adults' creative responses to media franchises such as comic books, films, and television series (Scott 2019), yet the women of this doll community were not imagining further adventures of trademarked characters within the world of existing media properties. Instead they appropriated figures intended to represent trademarked characters and cast them as actors in their own fictional worlds.

Although You Tube has provided a platform for tens if not hundreds of thousands of girls and women to produce and disseminate visual narratives using dolls to represent myriad fictional worlds, Film studies scholars have not scratched the surface of this body of work. Justin Wyatt's interview with Todd Haynes in *Film Quarterly* appeared in 1993, long before amateurs had the means to extend the techniques for animating Barbie dolls that Haynes' pioneered in *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*. The role of technology in turning doll play into public performance would make for a seminal case study of how this particular African American community engaged with what Henry Jenkins termed "convergence culture." My interest, however, is in identifying instances of distinctly African American object performance therefore my analysis will examine these doll performances through the lens of performance studies rather than media studies.

To that end, this essay revisits Steve Tillis' "The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production" in order to consider dolls as media figures "whose performance is made possible through technological mediation" (Tillis 172).

While Tillis' essay first appeared in 1999, before video streaming was accessible to the general public, twenty years later the COVID 19 pandemic has forced all puppeteers into technological mediation as the only way to perform before an audience under quarantine. While technological advances allow puppeteers to livestream their performances, setting up a static camera to capture direct manipulation of figures will likely prove just as unsatisfying to audiences as Adolph Zukor's scheme of filming "Famous Players in Famous Plays" did over one hundred years ago. Tillis' reflections on the forms puppetry might take in the Age of Media Production are therefore useful for considering whether the doll bloggers' videos count as puppetry and for analyzing this body of work as a model of how puppeteers can connect with audiences at a time when the future of live theater is uncertain.

## *Van's Doll Treasures*

Vanessa Morrison was born in 1968. She grew up in Alexandria, Virginia and earned an electrical engineering degree from Penn State University. Morrison worked as an engineer and manager at Eastman Kodak for about twelve years. After re-locating from Rochester, New York to Atlanta she switched to working as a realtor (*Blogger Profile*). Morrison married and enjoyed mothering her five stepchildren but was disappointed that her husband did not want to have children with her so they divorced amicably (Morrison "Yesterday We Celebrated Our Would Be 16<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" 2012). She began making porcelain dolls and teaching doll-making workshops around 2003 ("Departure from Fashion Dolls – Some of My Porcelain Dolls" 2011). She also worked with a group of black doll collectors on publishing an online magazine featuring doll photo stories, *My Dolls Story* (Burrough 2005 - 2020). In April 2009 she published her first post to *Van's Doll Treasures* on Blogger. She had started an Etsy store and apparently saw the blog as a way to promote her business. In July 2009 at age forty-one she was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma and given three to five years to live.

Starting with 21 posts in 2009, Morrison's most active year as a doll blogger was 2012 with 293 posts. In addition to her blog posts Morrison created 93 videos and shared them on her YouTube channel. As of June 30, 2020 her channel had 17.6K subscribers and had garnered 15,299,261 views. Her last blog post was August 11, 2017. Morrison passed away two months later.

Morrison named her fictional doll community Morristown. Six main middle class families, fifteen secondary middle class families, eight elite families, and various extended family members wove in and out of her stories. The primary characters were African American, but the storylines included a wide range of ethnicities. Morrison attracted a vibrant community of doll enthusiasts from all over the world as followers of the blog. The romance of Danielle Harper and Rod Taylor was the most compelling storyline.



**Figure 1:** The Taylor Family” by Vanessa Morrison.

Danielle and her sons first appeared in a post titled “New Family: The Harper Family” on Sunday, November 7, 2010. Danielle was a widow. Her husband was killed in a car accident. Their sons were Julian, age 5 and Jacob, age 2. In March 2011 when Danielle took her boys on a beach vacation with her neighbors, the Taylors, she met Anthony Taylor’s brother, Roderick. There was immediate chemistry between them. Rod was divorced. His ex-wife Melanie had primary custody of their nine-year-old daughter, Melanie. Danielle and Rod went on their first date in “Barbie Fashion Doll Story Ep #16,” and over the next year fell deeply in love. Morrison detailed their highly anticipated wedding in episodes 57 – 64.

Episode 57, “The morning of the wedding” opens with Danielle’s mother in the kitchen making waffles for her grandsons. Morrison sold 1:6 scale food made of polymer clay in her Etsy store so this vignette is a good product placement ad. Other brands featured include Motts apple juice and Joe Boxer brand apparel. Morrison constructed the set around a Mattel Grandma’s Kitchen play set. She added details such as patterned scrapbooking paper for the black and white tiled kitchen floor. The display of sets and fashions lends dignity to her characters. They are people of means and taste. They have artwork on their walls and ceramic bowls on the mantel over the fireplace.

Morrison's videos were always slideshow style using dozens of photos interspersed with title cards. She made no effort to create stop motion sequences. Tillis asserts that Walter Benjamin's theories about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction are not applicable to media figures such as CGI characters and stop motion characters because their animation is produced through technology rather than being a reproduction of some tangible object in motion (173) so Morrison's media figures may still qualify as puppets under his definition, particularly since he did not consider how camera movement and editing techniques could animate a media figure. The succession of poses and camera angles in Morrison's videos gives viewers the sense that they are watching slices of life unfold at a pace that stretches out each moment and makes each detail more poignant.

Tillis asks on what basis we can consider some or all media figures puppets (173)? Although Morrison does not animate her figures through puppetry techniques, she gives them "voice" by integrating dialogue text into her photos. Rather than creating speech bubbles she positioned dialogue text near the character that spoke it. She left the dialogue on screen long enough for viewers to read it and even changed the color of the text to create more contrast with the background when necessary (i.e. at 1:28 she puts white text instead of black over Cianna's dark hair). Her editing makes lines of dialogue appear and disappear in carefully choreographed sequence so it is words rather than motion that bring her figures to life.

The accompanying blog post drew 32 comments, about half consisting of Morrison's replies. Readers from as far away as Spain and Russia complimented the story. Shasarignis commented in French and Morrison replied in kind. Kenya G. Johnson complimented the photography, particularly the realism and the depth of field.

Episode 58 "Getting Dressed for the Wedding" opens in the hotel suite where Danielle and Leslie go to get dressed for the wedding. The set features a yellow sofa that Morrison had made. Morrison sold 1:6 scale sofas and pillows in her Etsy store and also took commissions for custom pieces. As an avid collector, She had enough 1:6 scale props to dress any set down to the smallest detail such as the lotion, perfume bottles, and tube of toothpaste on the vanity table. Danielle's mother arrives wearing a crocheted dress and a double strand of pearls around her neck. Like the other characters she enters with a stylish purse on her arm. A title card indicates that a professional make up artist will be doing Danielle's make up. Then the wedding planner ushers Rod's daughter, Nicole into the room. Nicole's attendance had been in doubt because Rod's ex-wife, Melanie was jealous and had originally decreed that Nicole could not be present at the wedding.

Rod and his brother Tony are waiting in another suite. Danielle's mother brings the boys over so Rod can dress them. Tony and Danielle's mother leave Rod alone with the boys. He gathers them on the brown suede sofa (another



one of Morrison's creations), and asks, "Well guys, it's almost time. Are you ready to be a family?" Comments for this video were disabled on You Tube.

In between videos Morrison published a blog post asking, "Do You have Doll Families Attending the Wedding?" She encouraged readers to send pictures of their dolls dressed for the wedding to her Facebook page. She also included a link to Hey It's Muff's post showing her doll, Tatiana getting ready to attend. Tatiana was a So In Style Trichelle. She donned a pink cocktail dress Muff's mother had made twenty years earlier. The last photo pulled back to show the diorama set up and Muff also revealed what lighting equipment she used:

I have a few consumer photo lighting kits and the boom light above is from a set. I got it from B&H Photo online. Although I have an umbrella to go with it, I didn't bother diffusing the light. That's a 150 watt bulb, so it wasn't that harsh. ("Wedding Attire" 2012)

Muff's post received 42 comments (about half being Muff's responses from readers all over the world). My own April 2, 2012 post to *Limbé Dolls* blog had Amira and Karim N'Diaye flying in from Dakar to attend the wedding. Morrison commented:

Amira and Karim look awesome! I am excited that they are coming all the way from Senegal. Love their attire. You should put some of your handmade fashions in your Etsy store. I, too, am kicking myself for not buying Tariq, or even the first Darius that came out that looks just like him. Thanks for reminding me I need to get those waffles listed. (Richards 2012)

Morrison published "The Latest Wedding Video" on Tuesday April 1, 2012. It drew 36 comments and responses. Finally on Monday, April 23 she could announce "Here Comes the Bride!" Episode 59 "The Ceremony Part I" sparked 155 comments. About half are Morrison responding to viewers. She even answered one in French "Merci! Maintenant que nous avons [sic] commence, je peux [sic] pousser un soupir de soulagement. Adele et moi sommes très heureux avec les résultats obtenus jusqu'à présent."

When the video opens the bride's party has assembled in the foyer outside the sanctuary. Over the years Mattel has produced play sets for just about every scene one can imagine including a pink and white wedding chapel. Morrison's church is much more dignified. She placed a plastic plant in a tall white vase in the corner of the foyer and crafted wooden double doors leading into the sanctuary. Inside the walls are white stucco and the floor is covered with burgundy carpet. Morrison made the rows of pews herself from cardboard covered with dark wood grained contact paper. Just dressing all the guests required a deep inventory of outfits in all sizes and a significant investment of time. Although Morrison did not animate her figures in real time, her meticulous attention to designing sets, props, and costumes enhanced the illusion that her characters are moving through a lifelike world.

Cianna and Jacob enter first, strewing white petals. Nicole and Julien follow with the bridal bouquet and the rings. Then Leslie, the matron of honor enters in a fitted pink gown with a mermaid's tail skirt. In each successive shot Morrison has taken the time to turn the guests' heads so that they follow the progress of the wedding party down the aisle. Rod and Tony wait at the altar with the pastor, an African American woman whose blue vestments originally belonged to a Class of 1996 graduation Barbie.

As the bride enters on the arm of her brother, the music changes to Wagner's "Bridal Chorus" from *Lohengrin*. Morrison and most of the other doll bloggers had no scruples about using trademarked figures in their stories but they learned to meticulously avoid using copyrighted music. If copyright holders complained, You Tube would either remove the offending content or disable the soundtrack. Other copyright holders participated in a pool that received royalty payments from ad revenues so when You Tube identified copyrighted music in a video, the company might place ads on it even if the copyright holder did not file a complaint. As Morrison explained to Ms. Leo's query on her April 23<sup>rd</sup> blog post "I actually buy my music now to avoid issues. There is a site called danosongs where you can use their songs if you give them credit."

This period saw the rise of social media influencers who generated six figure incomes by promoting products on their channels. Indeed another African American doll blogger named LaToya Moore-Broyles' earned deep respect amongst doll enthusiasts for her doll crafting tutorial videos on her My Froggy Stuff channel. By 2020 she was earning an estimated \$1.5 million per year from ads and endorsement deals (*Nailbuzz* 2020). Still the doll bloggers reviewed here all opted not to accept advertisements on their channels.

Morrison had invited her readers to send photos of their dolls dressed to attend the wedding to her Facebook page. She thanks them in a title card at the end of the video. A reader named Debbie had arranged for her proxy dolls to appear in the wedding. She was very pleased with the outcome:

Debbie April 23, 2012 at 8:02 PM

OMG, Vanessa, that was so beautiful! My husband (who doesn't understand the doll world) ran over to watch the video with me. He loved it too! He couldn't get over all the little details that went into this wedding. Who knows....maybe he'll start watching them with me on a daily basis. That was the best wedding we've been to in a long, long time. Can't wait for Part 2(note to self...need more tissues.)

Morrison replied:

Debbie - Thanks! I am touched that your husband watched it, too. Your doll ego had a great seat in the church. Did you show your husband your doll family? LOL!

Debbie responded:



ha ha ha, yes, my husband agreed that we had great seats. He also said he's more handsome than he remembered and I looked like a doll. He went on to say that maybe it was just the great lighting in church. Lol

Morrison's answer echoes one of the attractions puppetry holds for puppeteers "Tell him that's the beauty of the doll world. You can be anyone you want and look fabulous at it." Like conventional puppeteers she also understood that the angle of a figure's head can make its whole expression appear to change even when its features are permanently painted or sculpted in one position. Thus she makes skillful use of poses and camera angles to convey her characters' emotions. Vita Plastica commented on the blog post accompanying the wedding ceremony video: "\*sniff\* Rod's face at 2:35 was precious. I swear these dolls change expressions. Great ceremony so far!"

The ceremony continued in episode 60 ("The Ceremony Part II"). The scene opens *in medias res* with Shantavia the photographer working in the aisle. Danielle and Rod exchange vows as reaction shots of the guests and images of restless children in the pews heighten the audience's sense of being present at the ceremony. Danielle's three friends come up to read a poem they composed for her (Morrison does not share this poem with the viewers). A baby starts to fuss. Julian gets tired and sits down on the edge of the dais. Guests break out handkerchiefs and start to cry. Mothers cut their eyes and shush children. Once the pastor introduces "Mr. and Mrs. Taylor" the music changes back to Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" and the wedding party exits the sanctuary as the guests look on.

There were 43 comments on the blog post that accompanied part two of the wedding, "Back to the Wedding...(Video)." The lingering shot of the church doors when the pastor asks if anyone objects to the marriage led some viewers to expect that Melanie, Rod's ex-wife would storm through and create a scene. All were relieved that she did not appear and effusive about the emotions the ceremony evoked.

The next YouTube video, "Rod and Danielle's Wedding Photos" drew 79 comments; about half are Morrison's responses to viewers. "Wedding Reception Part I" followed with no intervening blog post. Amid 75 comments exchanged Morrison tellingly says "There will be a little more drama in this video, but for the most part my dolls don't have a lot of drama in their life. I like to focus on regular ordinary life." Her blog post on New Year's Day, 2011 gives a glimpse of why she kept her doll stories low key and upbeat for the most part. The first sentence reads: "Today is the last day of the worst year of my life. I am sharing this story with the hopes of bringing inspiration, not despair." Over the course of 2010 Morrison received a terminal cancer diagnosis, survived a car jacking, and broke her front teeth when she fainted and fell down the stairs in her home.

Out of these experiences Morrison found a new sense of freedom:

...The day I got diagnosed was the day I really started living. There was almost a sense of relief. I didn't have to focus on having enough money to retire at 65 or 67. I no longer had to worry about having good credit. I could actually live each day to the fullest. I was a work-a-holic before I was diagnosed. I am still a work-a-holic, but I'm more focused on the things that matter to me. ("My Very Personal Story about Tragedy and Triumphant in 2010" January 1, 2011)

Morrison's art was one of the things that mattered to her. The "Wedding Reception Part I" video shows that art mattered to her because it served to highlight the intimate moments that were the most meaningful experiences of life in her eyes. The video opens with more upbeat music. Rod and Danielle, still dressed in their wedding garb are spending a few moments alone at a local park. Meanwhile the guests have taken their seats at the reception, clustering at tables throughout the ballroom. The dialogue distills family interactions.

"Wedding Reception Part II" places more of these small details on display as shots of the buffet give Morrison a chance to show off more of the polymer clay food she sold in her Etsy store. Viewers left 95 comments praising such details. As always much of the story centers on children's interactions with their families. Tony tries to find a moment to talk to Rod alone but isn't able to initiate a conversation before the story takes an unexpected turn. Tony and Rod's long lost father shows up and proposes a toast. Rod is shocked and upset. He leaves the banquet hall to talk with his father and brother. The title card ends the video as a cliffhanger:

"Well, I guess Freeman decided not to wait any longer. I wonder what Rod and Tony are thinking. Will Raven forgive Ian? Will this reception ever end?"

Readers of the accompanying blog post, "Part Two of the Wedding Reception is Here," condemned Freeman's lack of discretion but enjoyed the drama he created. One of the comments sheds more light on Morrison's process and aesthetic:

Marta – In all of my video and stories, I have only reshot 3 pictures. With videos the image goes by so fast, you rarely notice the imperfect shots. There are things you can do in the digital imaging SW to make it better. I could have straightened the plate in the SW, if needed.

In his discussion of whether CGI characters can meet the UNIMA-USA criteria for excellence puppetry in video, Tillis addressed an objection that CGI performances eliminate the possibility of mistakes. He concedes that mistakes can be edited out of non-live performance but insists "mistakes remain in all kinds of non-live performance when the replacement of those mistakes does not seem worth the cost and/ or effort" (180). Morrison's comment indicates that she consciously made such decisions about the cost effectiveness of erasing mistakes, recognizing, as Tillis does that "a great performance can

contain more mistakes (a flubbed line, a misplaced prop, etc.) than a mediocre performance that is errorless but without passion or intelligence” (180).

Morrison finally brings the festivities to a close in Episode 64, “Wedding Reception III.” Freeman, Tony and Rod meet in the lounge. Freeman has been missing for seven years since his wife passed away. He blamed himself when she died of lung cancer because he was the smoker. The wives join the brothers in the lounge. Then Rod and Danielle return to the ballroom, apologize to their guests, and cut the festivities short. In the final credits Morrison celebrates the realization of her auteur vision:

“A VansDollTreasures Production

Written, Edited, and Produced by Vanessa Morrison”

Earlier in her blog career, Morrison returned from a hiatus caused by her illness and posted:

One day in mid August, I got enough energy to turn on the computer. I hadn’t posted to my blog since 2/22/10. I hadn’t made any new furniture. My Etsy site was in limbo. I went to check to see how my 3 little videos were doing. When I looked at my “Barbie and Baby” video, I was pleasantly surprised. Last I remembered it had about 334 views after about 7 months of being posted. Well it was now at 10,000!!! Yippee. Well this inspired me to get out the bed and back into my studio and I haven’t looked back since! So for all of you who watched that video or any of my other videos, THANK YOU! (“My Very Personal Story about Tragedy and Triumphant in 2010” January 1, 2011)

At the close of the wedding reception, Morrison’s regular readers were sorry to see the festivities end and particularly missed the ritual of cutting the wedding cake. Hey’s It’s Muff summed it all up saying:

This was a sweet, heartfelt ride you know. I think I found your videos right when Rod first spied Danielle on the beach trip. I’m seriously even tearing up thinking about it.

The work, the effort, the quality... I just want to thank you for letting me, us, step outside ourselves to enjoy so many moments in your creative world.

Muff would go on to produce her own series of narrative videos that extended Morrison’s techniques even further.

## Hey, It’s Muff

Muff started on Blogspot with 15 posts in 2011. The following year was her most active with 71 posts. Her last post was in 2017. Muff posted her first video to her

“Hey, It’s Muff” You Tube channel in 2013. She stopped posting after 59 videos in 2017. The five videos about her character, Tasha posted from March 22, 2013 to August 9, 2013 are the only doll narratives. The rest present tutorials or document shopping trips and new acquisitions. Muff also had a Squareup shop that is currently empty and a Facebook page that has not had any new posts since 2017.

Muff provided very few details about her personal life other than the fact that she lived in Florida. Her character, Tasha’s lifestyle may reflect her own level of affluence or it may be an aspirational fantasy. Tasha drives a sporty red Mini Cooper. She has just left a relationship with a boyfriend who did not treat her well and moved into her own apartment in a beautifully landscaped complex that Muff says is located in the artsy area of town: “I designed this based on the Riverside area of my town. Lots of old brick houses, brick streets and greenery abound”.

(“An Urban Dwelling” 2013). The set design therefore reflects not so much a consumerist fantasy as a desire for a space that supports creativity. In another response Muff confesses that the whole diorama was set up on a bed in her home, indicating that she did not have as much space for her creative work as she would have liked (“Anthony’s Advice” 2013).

Videos often failed to play within Blogspot and some readers would not look for the video on You Tube so Muff customarily published a transcript of the dialogue from her videos with still photos as a photo story on her blog after posting them to You Tube. Since she also included a translation tool on her blog, international readers could follow the story. My comment on “Kevin’s Confession, Part 1” celebrates Muff’s technical skill:

The video stalled two minutes in but I am already blown away. Your characters are well-developed with clear motivations. Their gestures and words express their “through lines” perfectly.

The dialogue advances the action and enhances the characterization. Thanks for putting it in the speech bubbles and making it large enough to read easily. You also placed all the speech bubbles strategically so that they clearly emanate from the character who is speaking but don’t obscure the rest of the scene.

The photography is outstanding. The shots are well-lit and artfully composed. I like the way that you shot sequences that add a bit of animation even though most of the images are stills.

The set is marvelously detailed and the well thought out design further expresses Tasha’s character. I have appreciated the tutorials you have shared as you were building the set. I hope you will also share some of your video production process. What software did you use to edit the piece and put in the speech bubbles?

You have definitely raised the bar on doll videos. Thank you for a very bright start to my day!

Muff replied “I use Windows Movie Maker to make the video and Photoshop 7 to add the speech bubbles.” Thus she had a clear artistic vision and was able to realize it even though she was working with rudimentary tools.

Tillis notes that, “Media figures share with puppetry the crucial trait of presenting characters through a site of signification other than actual living beings” (173). Yet most of the roles Hollywood has scripted for Black bodies are “sites of signification” that perpetuate the objectification of Black bodies rather than recognizing their inhabitants as living beings. Saidiya Hartman has identified the Black body as a “scene of subjection.” So while the delight and enchantment in seeing dolls come alive could be a strong motivation for a doll collector to attempt making a doll video, casting dolls rather than live actors was also a more accessible way for Black women to counter the meanings living Black bodies have historically evoked on screen.

The barriers for talented women like Muff to access such power within the film and television industry are high. Martha L. Lauzen’s 2019 – 2020 “Boxed In” report indicates that in 2017, women filled only a quarter of the creator, executive producer, and writer roles in television. Darnell Hunt similarly documented the barriers African American writers face in the film and television industry in a 2017 report commissioned by Color of Change. Of 234 series, only 4.8% of the 3,817 writers employed were Black. Thus, despite the success of the phenomenally talented Showrunner, Shonda Rhimes, the odds of a Black woman securing the opportunity to produce her own live action television series were exceedingly slim.

In 2011 while the community of doll bloggers were producing stories with “media figures” Issa Rae launched a live action web series titled “Awkward Black Girl.” Born in 1985, Rae was relatively more privileged than the creators of the doll videos who were born in the 1960s and 70s. Growing up, her father’s income as a physician provided an upper middle class lifestyle in Potomac, MD and the affluent View Park-Windsor Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles. Rae matriculated at Stanford University and then moved to New York City where she received a fellowship at the Public Theater and also attended classes at the New York Film Academy. With these credentials Rae could likely have earned a seat in the writer’s room on a network series and then worked her way up to producing her own series. Rae wanted more creative control, however. Writing, producing, directing, shooting, and starring in her own series gave Rae total control over her representation of a young Black woman’s day to day life. The size of the audience “Awkward Black Girl” attracted on YouTube put her in a strong negotiating position when she took the concept to HBO as *Insecure*. The doll bloggers may not have shared Rae’s career goals, but they did share her drive to retain creative control over their representations of Black life.

Each of the videos in Muff’s series drew comments from more than twenty readers.

Some praised the story and production values. Viewers particularly appreciated the realistic level of detail in the sets and the naturalistic quality of the acting as expressed through the stop motion sequences. Some identified

the story as part of the soap opera genre and compared it to *Scandal* by Shonda Rimes. Tania Modleski was one of the first critics to make a serious study of soap operas. She found that “In direct contrast to the typical male narrative film, in which the climax functions to resolve difficulties, the ‘mini- climaxes’ of soap operas function to introduce difficulties and to complicate rather than simplify the characters’ lives” (107). Modleski further identified lack of closure, multiple identification, and emphasis on reading facial expressions in close-ups as characteristics of soap operas. She argued that the narrative form of the soap opera makes anticipation of the ending an end in itself, thereby creating pleasure from what she describes as the central experience of women’s lives – waiting.

For readers of the doll blogs, anticipating the next installment of the video narrative was a significant part of the pleasure. The waiting was what constituted the community. While waiting people exchanged comments and published blog posts that responded to the previous installment, thereby generating more comments that referenced the original video and anticipated the possible outcome of the story.

The wait between “Anthony’s Advice” posted April 12 and “Kevin’s Confession” posted July 3, 2013 gave viewers plenty of time to wonder whether Kevin would find the courage to profess his love to Tasha. The wait for “Kevin’s Confession Part 2” posted on August 9th allowed viewers to savor the humor in Tasha’s assumption that Kevin was trying to come out as gay and to speculate about her response to his true feelings. Since Kevin was Tasha’s stepbrother viewers were divided on the “incestuous” nature of the relationship. Some hoped that Kevin and Tasha would be able to make a romantic relationship work. Others felt that even though they are not blood siblings a romantic relationship was out of the question but hoped that the brother/ sister bond would remain strong.



Figure 2: “Kevin’s Confession” by Hey It’s Muff

No one commented on the interracial nature of the relationship. The year after Muff published these videos, Christian Rudder’s analysis of data from online dating sites indicated that while black women and Asian men were appreciated by prospective partners of their own race, they were consistently viewed as the



least desirable partners by all other racial and ethnic groups in American society. In *Dataclysm: Love, Sex, Race, and Identity* he finds that “...the two essential patterns of male-to-female attraction are plain: men tend to like women of their own race. Far more than that, though, they don’t like black women.” When he looked at the data on women’s preferences he found that “Blacks are again unappreciated by non-black users, but Asian men have joined them in the deep red (116).” Thus it is interesting that another doll blogger from this period, Ebony Nicole of *Brooklyn Stars Forever* imagined a black woman/Asian man pairing in a series of about seventeen “Takeo & Addie: A True Love Story” videos.

Muff’s responses to audience comments detail her creative process and vision. Initially she reassured viewers that she had the whole story in her head and there would be a happy ending. Other responses described how much work producing the video was. Yet Muff also admitted that if she had an assistant she would probably not be satisfied with their work and would end up doing everything herself anyway. Finally two years after posting the last episode she said “CityChica, sorry to say this was the end of the story, lol. Making doll stories was way more time consuming than I could keep up with” (“Kevin’s Confession Part 2” 2013). This lack of closure is true to the soap opera genre.

## Roxanne’s Dolls

Roxanne Magee started her Blogspot blog in 2009. She made 44 posts that year and published an all-time high of 51 posts in 2014. Her last post was in January 2019. Magee also maintains a Facebook page and a You Tube channel. As of June 30, 2020 her You Tube channel has thirty-one videos, 163 subscribers, and a total of 94,014 views.

Born around 1970, in the “About Me” tab of her blog, Magee says that she loved playing with dolls as a child but “none of my childhood dolls made it into adulthood with me.” She made her first doll purchase as an adult in 1989 and by 2012 had amassed 277 dolls “give or take”. At the time of Ms. Leo’s 2012 Mass Blogger Interview Magee had never attended a doll show and only talked to other collectors on the web. As a full figured woman her request to Mattel or other toy makers would be “Someone please make some articulated chubby dolls (all ages, male and female).”

One of Magee’s featured doll characters is Calista from MGA entertainment’s Best Friends Club, Ink. MGA created this line of dolls in 2009 during the period when Mattel had embroiled them in a lawsuit over their wildly popular Bratz line of fashion dolls. An MGA press release stated that the BFC, Ink dolls came with “relatable fashions and interactive journals meant to inspire girls to discover their individuality, and focus on the experiences girls go through in life, knowing that friends will be there, forever” (MGA Entertainment 2009).

Over the life of her blog, Magee vividly imagined the experiences of the Calista character and published 43 posts presented as entries from Calista's diary. The post titled "Summer Separation" published on June 15, 2014, included a video with the same title. Magee is a skilled writer who realistically captures the voice of her junior high avatar. In this diary entry Calista relates that with only days left in the school term, her boyfriend, Bob announced that he would be away for most of the summer. When he admits that he had known for six weeks that this separation was coming, Calista feels confused and angry even though Bob tries to reassure her, even kissing her tenderly on the cheek.

Magee typically uses videos to highlight the emotions that the characters in her photo stories are feeling so "Summer Separation" is a music video-style montage rather than a linear narrative. In critiquing Levenson's criteria for defining puppetry in video, Tillis observes:

(Curiously, Levenson is not concerned with real-time vocal performance, probably because it is so rare in film and video.) An alternate meaning of real-time would refer to a synchronicity not only of control and movement, but of audience reception as well (174).

Since Magee's videos show no real-time synchronicity of control, movement, vocal performance, or audience reception, they would not meet Levenson's definition of puppetry. Still, by choosing to sing her own cover of Phil Collins' "Against All Odds" as the soundtrack for this video, she poignantly gives voice to Calista's pain.

The opening shot shows Calista and Bob standing in front of their lockers in the hallway at school. The locker background is a photograph rather than a three-dimensional set but it looks convincing. The camera zooms in and gradually pans up to include their faces in the frame as other students cross through the frame in front of them. Bob turning and moving away from Calista is a repeated motif throughout the video. Magee accomplishes most of the animation by manipulating the dolls like rod puppets while holding their legs below the frame. Bob is a vintage Bob Scout Doll made by Kenner in the 1970s. These figures had loose neck joints so Magee is able to suggest the characters in dialogue by subtly moving Bob's head in an over the shoulder shot while the camera focuses on Calista's reaction.

In between the locker sequences Magee includes still shots from earlier photo stories she had posted about Bob and Calista. These images represent Calista's memories of her time with Bob over the whole school year. They appear sitting in class together, attending a pep rally, etc. Magee animates the images by applying Ken Burns effects so that even when the figures are not moving, there is a sense of flow that maintains the illusion that they are animated.

Magee worked with a relatively low resolution camera and used improvised lighting so the image quality is not the best but the frame at 0:58 shows the thought that went into her shot composition. As Magee sings the refrain "take

a look at me now,” a still of Calista looking at herself in a hand mirror appears on screen. This shot was from an earlier blog entry titled “Growth Spurt” where Calista was reflecting on how her body was changing. Calista is posed in profile holding the mirror so that it faces the viewer but her face is reflected in it. It is difficult to compose such a shot without revealing the camera in the reflection. The effort Magee made to capture this image gives the viewer a powerful window into Calista’s inner emotions as the Ken Burns effect zooms in closer and closer on her face in the mirror.

In responding to Doll Party’s comment on an erotic video shared on her July 21, 2014 post, “Weak,” Magee described her process saying, “Yes, a lot of work went into this video. About 20 minutes for the song, the filming took maybe a couple of hours and the editing took the most time - about 7 hours.” This response shows her commitment to artistry while the next sequence in “Summer Separation” displays Magee’s keen understanding of editing techniques.

From the mirror shot she cross dissolves to show Calista walking alone on the beach. This image was part of a story about a beach vacation but now it emphasizes Calista’s feeling of loneliness -- “there’s just an empty space.” Next Magee cross dissolves to a party Calista and Bob attended together, Bob presenting Calista with a Valentine, a pool party with classmates, and then Calista sitting alone at a table set for a formal dinner (this was from a Thanksgiving story but once again it underscores “there’s just an empty space.”

During the drum break at 1:33 a series of stills from the locker scene dramatizes the characters’ gestures by cutting rapidly on the beat, then the puppetry sequences resume. Magee creates an especially impressive effect at 1:44 when the lyric “I wish I could just make you turn around, turn around and see me cry” plays, Calista raises her glasses and a tear rolls down her face.

Another montage of stills follows the tear; Calista and Bob leaning against a tree in their bathing suits, Calista and Bob at a fair. A ferris wheel looms in the night background (a photo) and Bob is handing Calista a large stuffed bear. Bob and Calista making angels in the snow. Bob and Calista visiting a farm. When the refrain, “there’s just an empty space” returns, Calista appears sitting on the couch in front of the TV alone hugging the bear Bob gave her. This image was originally from a New Year’s post. Instead of hope for the future it now frames Calista alone with her memories of the past.

In her diary entry, Calista struggles to understand Bob’s motivations. He finally kisses her for the first time at 2:17 in the video and starts to move out of the frame. The video ends with Calista standing alone in front of the lockers. The doll cannot emote like a live actor but the shot composition and the music effectively convey her pain and confusion.

Only two viewers have commented on the video but Magee received and responded to eight comments on the blog post. All were enthusiastic in their praise of the video. The Grandmommy said “LOVING THAT VIDEOOOOOOOOOOOO! You did it girl! :-D” Muff said “That video was fantastic! I liked the heck out of

it on YouTube. I enjoyed the singing, the action shots, the stills... everything! Well done! \*clap clap clap\* and D7ana said “Clapping! Love the video and the vocals. Yay, Roxanne! Thanks for sharing.”

Many of the readers also addressed Calista directly offering sympathy and advice. The Grandmommy suggested signing up for some summer classes and camps while D7ana wrote a five paragraph letter reminding Calista that Bob had as much fun with her as she had with him and would miss her too. Calista wrote back to the Grandmommy and D7ana thanking them for their advice in a sweet, respectful tone. Then D7ana shared that Roxanne had inspired her to create her own first video and Roxanne replied: “I enjoyed your video very much, D7ana! I feel good that I inspired you, because you’ve inspired me so much over the years. I’m looking forward to seeing more of your videos.”

Where Tillis finds that “Media figures share with puppetry the crucial trait of presenting characters through a site of signification other than actual living being” (175), the one distinctive trait of African American object performance is the drive to resist the objectification of the Black body. All three artists effectively used Black dolls as “sites of signification” to achieve this goal. Morrison uses dolls to show the development of a mature adult relationship that leads to marriage. Muff shows that Black women can be attractive as romantic partners, not just as sex toys for men of any race. Magee shows that Black girls are not born as lascivious temptresses, that they can be sweet, innocent, and vulnerable as they learn about sexuality just like anyone else.

While Tillis skirts the question of voice because vocal performance is almost never live in media, Morrison, Muff, and Magee all use voice as a way of animating their media figures even when the figures are not in motion. They also demonstrated that camera movement and editing techniques are other ways to animate media figures that Tillis did not consider. Although doll play has traditionally been distinguished from puppetry because it presumably did not occur before an audience, the doll bloggers’ intimate engagement with their audience provides an instructive model of how to create *communitas* even when the performers and audience cannot share the same moment in time and space.

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