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Home on the Range: Kids, Visual Culture, and Cognitive Equity

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This essay focuses on Binney and Smith’s creation and marketing of Crayola fleshtone art products from the late 1950s until the mid-1990s, analyzing the company’s shifting nomenclature—from “flesh” to “peach” to its multicultural collection. After reflecting on the significance of Crayola’s color adjustment for children’s sociocultural and aesthetic development and for teacher’s pedagogical repertoires around diversity issues, I introduce an original notion—cognitive equity. I propose this as a refined way of understanding racial and cultural equity issues that don’t just revolve around statistics and access to institutions, but also inscribes a new normative vision of skin color equity directly into technologies, products, and body representations in a range of visual media. At the very early stage of children’s cognitive development when stereotypes and racisms are being formed, this would be a particularly intelligent design strategy in which to reinforce multiculturalism and multiracism in all aspects of their visual culture and the commodities that are available to them.

Keywords: flesh tones; color balance; Crayola; multiracialism; cognitive equity

The extent to which we take everyday objects for granted is the precise extent to which they govern and inform our lives.

(Margaret Visser, 1986)

This article is about why skin color matters in technologies, objects, and images designated for children. My central argument will demonstrate why a dynamic range or a continuum of colors from light beiges and pinks to dark browns should become the new norm for skin colors that are embedded in visual technologies (such as digital cameras, film chemistry, crayons), images, and products that reflect or depict some notion of skin color. I shall argue that it is not enough to explicitly teach children antiracist values in schools and at home. These values must be reflected in the commodities, images, and media that surround kids as reminders. My empirical research and conceptual work on this issue are emergent from a broader series of case studies that I have been undertaking for
my book called *Colour Balance*. Here, I am examining the ways in which skin color has been imagined, embedded, and color shifted over time as it becomes apparent to manufacturers of various technologies and products that not all skin is white. My interest in the skin color adjustment proceeds beyond the recognition that the default of whiteness is no longer appropriate for societies that claim to be multicultural and multiracial.

Underpinning my research is a key assumption that images and commodities in their surroundings form part of the inferential pedagogical repertoire for children by which they are drawn into the dominant ideologies of a given society. Thus, I am concerned with designers’ selection of core racial values, ethnocultural framing of products and racial reference fields into which technologies, images, and products are inserted and, in turn, are reflected back to the objects’ users. Consequently, if the racial or cultural frame and reference field of a technology or product itself offers an encoded “preferred reading” (Hall, 1981) already embedded in its design and form, such as the message that *Caucasian-ness or light skin is the international norm for skin beauty*, then how can we expect children to go beyond this limited and inferentially racist notion that *this* is the single standard against which to compare other skin colors? In other words, if tools to create visual representations such as art materials are, indeed, cognitively skewed to norms of Caucasian-ness, then what subtle teachings about race are they actually reinforcing in children?

Take, for example, the history of the color *flesh* marketed as part of the Crayola crayon palette between 1949 and 1962. This is a particularly good exemplar of my argument because reference to the concept of flesh and its corresponding color(s) have undergone a series of color adjustments in the United States in particular eras. Between 1949 and 1962, the crayon called flesh that was circulating matched the skin colors of a very limited number of people. *Flesh* was a whitish, peachy color that harmonized very well with a wide range of Caucasian skin tones. In fact, it proposed an equation between skin itself and whiteness, and in no way could pass as a crayon to color African American, Asian, Hispanic, North American Indian, or Inuit skin tone ranges.

By 1962, enough publicity and protest had been exerted on Binney and Smith (the makers of Crayola crayons) by the Civil Rights movement and by those whose fleshtones were not within the Caucasian range to convince them to change the name of the color to *peach*. This name shift is most important to Crayola’s color history (Binney & Smith, n.d.-a) because it was the first public recognition of race in such an ordinary product as the wax crayon. Clearly, the decision to change the name was not made just because market research indicated a preference for one name over the other.

Rosemarie P. Mandarino, an art consultant working for Binney and Smith at the time of the name change recalls the sociocultural context of the decision:

> The Civil Rights movement was in full flood with great stress on raising self-esteem in the Black community. “Black is beautiful” was a phrase used repeatedly and especially to Black children. When these children opened their boxes of crayons to color
with, they, their teachers and parents became very aware that the color called Flesh did not represent theirs. As a consequence, the mail being received at the corporate offices of Binney and Smith, Inc., then located in New York City, included many letters protesting the use of Flesh as a color name since it portrayed a Caucasian skin tone which obviously was not theirs. The officers of the company, after consultation with and input from their staff of artists, color chemists, and art consultants agreed they had a valid point and made the decision to change the name.

The color itself was not part of the basic 16-color Color Wheel, but one of the additional colors that filled a particular need. Since blending tints and shades of colors with wax crayon is difficult, especially for children, colors such as Flesh, Sky Blue and others were formulated and added to the various assortments. I assume the color name Flesh was formulated to depict a Caucasian skin tone in a time when that was considered correct to answer a specific need for coloring with a wax crayon.

The selection of the name Peach to replace Flesh was chosen after referring to the United States Catalogue of Standardized Color Names. I’m not sure of the title of this volume but I know it was part of the color labs and the library and was heavily relied upon. There were a number of names listed to describe the color. One of these was Peach. It was chosen after a consensus of opinions from the aforementioned staff. Since that time, names for many of the crayon colors have changed. You will no longer find Prussian Blue or Carmine Red. In some instances, the actual color was reformulated to answer the changing needs and tastes of the users; the teachers, artists and, most importantly, the children (Rosemarie P. Mandarino—retired color/arts consultant, Binney & Smith, personal communication, July 9, 1996).

The change from flesh to peach was made essentially for reasons of social justice and racial equity; it made good moral and economic sense in a period of United States history in which the civil rights movement was beginning to make political and constitutional gains. The retirement of flesh signified the recognition of an obvious ideological and racist bias embedded in the conception of the actual product, and Binney and Smith sought to correct it.

This is not to say that a racist bias was deliberately or consciously placed in their products. My point, rather, is to identify a pervasive dominant cognitive belief system around race, a racial unconsciousness embedded within North American business and manufacturing practices of the time. Corporate America, until very recently, has created and marketed products relating to skin color reflecting “white flesh” tones as if they were the only existing ones. Binney and Smith’s interpretation of the color flesh as “white” was little different from the majority of North American- and European-based companies then producing consumer items for a market that was for the most part Caucasian. As a matter of historical record, in comparison with manufacturers of flesh-tone band-aids, nylon stocking companies, whose selection of flesh colors for the longest time reflected a range of Caucasian skin tones, or popular U.S.-based make-up companies, which only relatively recently added an array of shades for peoples of color, Binney and Smith were quick to shift their social contours in response to public pressures circulating in the late fifties and early sixties. Of course, from a market perspective, it made impeccable sense for them to correct their labeling of the color flesh in acknowledgment of the physical and material evidence that the product had, indeed, been mismarked in the first instance.
The Multicultural Crayon Collection—A Change in the Spirit of the Times

Having retired the color *flesh* in 1962, one would have expected Binney and Smith to almost immediately produce a series of other colors to accommodate their public recognition of diverse skin tones. However, there was a notable gap of almost 30 years between the naming of peach and the launching of the multicultural collection of products. Why did it take so long for Binney and Smith to multiculturalize and to highlight racial differences as an integral feature of their color palettes? Furthermore, what was it that convinced them that the early nineties was the right time to adapt their merchandise to more diverse representational practices?

To the best of my knowledge, based on document research, interviews, textual analysis, there was no concerted *formal* lobby group made up of members of the general public that mounted a campaign to persuade the corporation to multiculturalize its products. User groups did interact with their public relations officers but in an ad hoc manner inquiring about a time when the company would develop crayons for Peoples of Color (Eric Zebley, personal communication, June 10, 1996). Art teachers were the most concerned user group because they engaged with children producing self-portraits on a daily basis, and because social science curricula was beginning to focus on diversity studies.

How many phone calls and/or letters were needed for the company to pay attention to its consumers’ requests? At what point did the company’s recognition of diversity studies motivate the development of a range of alternatives rather than a negative and passive retreat from potential criticism? What were the critical factors that might have initiated a corporate policy change that would mark their products as recognizing a shift in the cultural, racial, and social norms of society? Why was it that by 1990 the idea was more than acceptable that those colors useful in representing skin, eyes, and hair of all peoples, already existent and available in several collections of their crayons, should be selected out and marketed as a separate multicultural package? In other words, why then?

Unfortunately, I cannot provide the definitive response to this inquiry. I can point out, however, that multiculturalism was in the air at the time; that the civil rights movement had made important inroads into the education system; that the educational curricula began in the mid-eighties to incorporate African American, First Nations, and various ethnic historical and cultural studies; that non-Caucasian stories and personnel began to be privileged within the media, norms of whiteness began to be challenged as exclusionary; and that the logic of capitalism vis-à-vis global marketing meant that a necessary color adjustment would have to be made to accommodate multicolored bodies and biases of people around the world. Certainly, all of these factors suggest that a social and perceptual shift was underway that would be irreversible. Binney and Smith moved with the spirit of these times, but it only moved this far and then passively waited for consumer responses.

Company planning for multicultural products began in 1990 and by 1991, boxes of skin, hair, and eye color-appropriate crayons were ready to be launched.
Their first targeted market was that of educators; their second was retail sales, where they “lasted about a year-and-a-half” (Eric Zebley, personal communication, June 10, 1996). In 1991, a People Pack Multination collection of My World Colors, which later became known as Multicultural Crayons3 was designed and launched in a full range of skin tones.4

From my interviews, it is clear that teachers’ requests were one of the decisive factors in the decision to produce the collection so that children would be able to accurately draw, paint, and mark their own images in all varieties of skin colors.

On a prominent leaflet outlining their multicultural products subtitled Helping Children See Themselves and Their World, Binney and Smith (n.d.-b) described the reasons educators gave for wanting the collection:

Educators have asked Binney and Smith to produce a line of multicultural art products, in a full range of skin tones, since people are not black and white [sic]. It strengthens children’s comfort with who they are when they can draw themselves in colors that truly reflect their complexions. When children are given boxes of crayons and markers that have a variety of skin tones, it enables and encourages them to draw a diverse community, recognizing the ethnic diversity around them (Binney & Smith, n.d.-c, p. 1).

To facilitate art teachers’ use of the new collection, pedagogical materials were developed by Binney and Smith consultants that have been distributed throughout the schools in North America. These include lesson plans, model designs, and other curricular variations for lessons on diversity issues and have been found very useful by teachers.

What is not so clear is why Binney and Smith decided not to market these very same products as aggressively to the retail market, that is, by providing support materials to parents and family, as was done with educators. Thus, in as much as Binney and Smith is to be praised for its positive social intervention in what we can assume to have been a low-profile lobbying effort by educators, one is left wondering about the lack of proactive marketing parallels for retail clients.

Is the Medium the Message?

What is the message of the flesh-in-wax crayon over the last several decades and what does it say about our perceptions of our bodies as color-marked citizens within North American society? What racial color options could we have used to draw before 1962 and then again before 1992? What colors can we now choose to be—this question refers to what colors we can be on paper of course.

The decision to rename flesh in 1962 and the 1991 launching of the multicultural collection opened up many philosophical possibilities for users of Crayola products that were not Caucasian. It indicated the potential to reconceptualize the color of one’s body on paper for one. Second, it legitimized body colors that in the past had been discouraged, that of Brown and Black bodies. Finally,
broader notions of pigment variation suggested a new way of looking at our bodies’ whiteness norms and these inferred a concurrent shift in our standards of beauty regarding skin color and race.

With the withdrawal of multicultural crayons and other products from the retail market as of 1993, this leaves us in a dilemma. Is diversity to exist only within the walls of the schoolhouse? What happens to multiculturalism at home? Why is there a two-tiered system of integration—one for the school and one for the streets? Is this sectoralism a wise strategy? When will notions and products emergent from a multicultural perspective migrate into storefront America on a more permanent basis?

The color adjustments that Binney and Smith have undertaken are significant historically. As small and trivial as they may seem to the ordinary person, they denote a powerful shift in the tools used to study, draw, and represent the human body on paper, and they are generally targeted toward children at a vulnerable age when they first begin to record their perceptions of the social, cultural, and political bodies and institutions in which they live. Splitting the color palette into two—one for the educational, the other for the retail sector—may very well, though not necessarily, trigger a corresponding split in race consciousness with deeper implications for future race relations.

Is a crayon just a crayon? It is my contention in taking on this topic that a crayon is more than a crayon. The Crayola crayon appears politically innocent because in appearance it’s just a crayon. But when notions of skin color are embedded within an everyday object such as a crayon, you begin to see what society is teaching its children. Its values, its perspective on racial and cultural issues become apparent. If you read a society symptomatically, if you look at the surface or range of its products, signs, and symbols in search of a deeper meaning, you can begin to take seriously what at first appears to be its insignificant play tools, one of which is the common crayon.

**Cognitive Equity: Toward an Embedded Normative Range of Skin Tones**

Reaching beyond the current critique of whiteness (e.g., Dyer, 1997; Winston, 1996), this case study begins to document evidence for an original conceptual notion that I am calling cognitive equity—a new way of understanding racial and cultural equity issues that doesn’t revolve around statistics and access to institutions but rather inscribes a vision of skin color equity into technologies, products, and body representations in a range of visual media. This is a particularly important design prototype to reinforce multiculturalism and multiracialism in young children’s visual culture and commodities because it is at a very early stage of their cognitive and cultural development that stereotypes and racisms are formed and reinforced.

Finally, in an effort to expand the potential inclusiveness of representations for current technologies and to widen the skin tone ranges embedded in a variety of
portrayal practices, my work suggests two possible strategies that would strengthen children’s capabilities to develop racial and cognitive equity: (a) a reconceptualization and adjustment of technology, image, and product design so that it becomes easier to capture and reproduce the range of skin tones without having to resort to a variety of often unsuccessfully executed compensatory practices and (b) the development of a wider range of skin color norms in body representations so that the range itself becomes the standard, the new norm, for all media and tools that facilitate (virtual, two- and three-dimensional) portrayals and depictions of bodies exhibited in the arts and commerce.

As more and more manufacturers and creative producers explicitly acknowledge the skin tone values they are working with and reinforcing, and as they begin to tackle the complexities of the color adjustment process, we shall hopefully note a wider public recognition and acceptance of multiracialism. Of course, there are no guarantees that implementing my suggested strategies would automatically help children to develop cognitive equity. That would also require complementary changes in school curricula, in the manufacturing economy, and in discourses about diversity at school, at home, on the streets, in storefronts, and in the media.

As challenging as this shift may be to actually achieve, the establishment of a color continuum—rather than the retention of whiteness as a default reference point for skin color reproduction—would be an important starting point from which children could begin to perceive, categorize, and think about race and ethnicity in a different way. With the current global emphasis on cultural and racial diversity, this strategy would be an invaluable cognitive and pedagogical intervention that would likely give new meaning and broader context to the old cowboy song, *Home on the Range*.

**Notes**

1. Other color-name adjustments with skin tone implications that have taken place over the years include:

   - The switch from Prussian (1949) to Midnight blue (1958), which occurred because teachers and students were no longer familiar with Prussian history.
   - The shift from Indian Red (1958) to Chestnut (1999): The color Indian Red was originally based on a reddish-brown pigment commonly found near India. Nonetheless, the manufacturer had gotten complaints from teachers who indicated that students thought the color represented North American Indians and decided that it would be politically correct to choose a simpler name that could not be misinterpreted.

2. In my own work, I differentiate between the terms multicultural and multiracial in the following way. Multicultural(ism) can refer to cultural and ethnic backgrounds exclusively and does not include the range of skin colors that is covered in the term multiracial(ism). However, the way in which the term is used by Binney and Smith, and many others I might add, indicates a conflation of the two terms under the heading of multiculturalism.
3. It seems that another crayon manufacturer had had the same idea and had already trademarked the name People Pack and so Crayola had to rename its product in respect of the patents and trademark laws.

4. Crayola multicultural products have expanded beyond the wax crayon to include the following media, along with appropriate names: crayon colors—Sepia, Burnt Sienna, Mahogany, Tan, Peach (formerly known as flesh), Apricot, Black, and White for blending; washable paint colors—Brown, Mahogany, Terra Cotta, Olive, Bronze, Tan, Beige, Peach; and washable markers—Sienna, Mahogany, Terra Cotta, Bronze, Tawny, Golden Beige, Beige, and Tan.

References


Lorna Roth is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montreal where she teaches and researches matters related to minorities, race, and cross-cultural communications. Her recent publications include a book on Canadian indigenous media titled Something New in the Air: The Story of First Peoples Television Broadcasting in Canada (2005). She is currently working on a book called Color Balance: Race and “Intelligent Design” in which she examines how skin color has been imagined, produced, and adjusted over time in products and technologies that have a notion of flesh tone embedded within their design. Her research focuses on what manufacturers do when they recognize that not all skin is “white.”