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Playing with diversity: racial and ethnic difference in playmobil toys

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ABSTRACT

How should toymakers represent a diverse society? Surprisingly, given the force of recent debates over race and nation and over migration, multiculturalism, and the postcolonial condition of Europe and North America, there is relatively little scholarship on how the toy industry engages with these particular themes. This article seeks to remedy this by taking a single toy company, Playmobil, as a case study for exploring the politics of racial and ethnic difference in its toys and marketing materials. It argues that the company, in an effort to diversify its products without alienating wary customers, has incorporated difference through specific strategies that elide and thereby reinforce an implicitly white, majoritarian norm, following a pattern of “banal multiculturalism” (Thomas 2011). By exploring these strategies in detail and by tying them to longstanding historical patterns, this study will suggest how companies can more critically challenge their own exclusionary practices of representation.

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Introduction

Toys are heavily invested with semiotic, psychological, political, and economic significance, and scholars in a variety of fields have explored these investments from various angles. Inspired not least by Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s iconic, if also flawed, doll preference study (Clark and Clark 1947; Bergner 2009), social scientists have explored how toys can shape a child’s understandings of gender (Weigram and Dinella 2018), race and ethnicity (Srinivasan and Cruz 2015), migration status (Jones and Rutland 2018), and disability (O’Neill, McDonald, and Jones 2018; Schalk 2017) and have experimented with using toys to uncover and challenge prejudice. Historians and cultural theorists have focused on contextualizing toys, showing how they have been used to both produce and challenge prevailing norms of race, gender, class, ability, and nation (Bernstein 2011; Martin 2014; Ellis and King 2015; Forman-Brunell and Whitney 2015; Simpson 2020).

These disparate strands of scholarship have been drawn together in recent years with a wave of activist campaigns in Europe and North America calling for a “toy like me.” Campaigners have drawn attention to social inequalities by highlighting histories of marginalization in the toy market and by insisting on the importance of uplifting representations for children’s self-esteem. Small-scale entrepreneurs, often frustrated parents, have responded with products like Lottie dolls (Ireland), Zuree dolls (UK), and Lammily dolls (USA), and major toymakers like Lego and Mattel have also updated their toy lines to reflect a broader range of appearances and social roles across lines of gender,

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race and ethnicity, and disability (Lins de Almeida 2017). Many toymakers, like product designers and marketers more generally, want to be identified with a diversity agenda associated with fairness and equality. Their challenge, however, is not merely to avoid demeaning depictions and increase positive depictions. As Burton suggests in her discussion of critical multiculturalism (2002; Chin 2017), effecting fundamental marketplace change requires confronting the power structures and inequalities that have structured society, and this must include a confrontation with long-established semiotic and discursive patterns that have diminished, erased, or otherwise oppressed marginalized groups (Davis 2018; Coleman and Yochim 2008). However, making such an effort also runs the risk of alienating consumers wary of change or critical of the politics of inclusion. As Steven Vertovec (2012) and Sara Ahmed (2012) suggest, institutions seeking to avoid controversy can turn to banal or tokenistic definitions of diversity that reinforce marginalization.

In this article I assess how a single toymaker has managed these tensions in its representations of racial and ethnic difference. My case study is Playmobil, a world-leading toy brand owned by the Brandstätter Group (also known as “geobra Brandstätter”) that has been in production since 1974. I survey its product lines and marketing materials over this time, treating them as expressions of a semiotic system that, in any given year, conveys a coherent worldview meant to be recognizable to consumers in Europe and North America above all (Van Leeuwen 2009; Köpper 2014; von Holzen 2017). In this I follow the company’s own claim (Playmobil 2022) that its toys allow children to “recreate and experience the world in miniature” and also to imagine unlimited new worlds of their own design. I test these corporate claims to accuracy and imaginative liberation with an approach that is fundamentally historical. Drawing from semiotics and discourse analysis as well as postcolonial and whiteness studies, I will illustrate how, over time, Playmobil’s design choices have variously excluded or marginalized social groups marked as outsiders by ethnicity and race. This has been true even as, in recent years, the company’s offerings have become markedly more inclusive. My central argument will be that this recent shift follows what Mary E. Thomas (2011) has called “banal multiculturalism,” a superficial appreciation of difference that avoids controversy but also frustrates calls for a more diverse manner of representation by leaving racialized structures fundamentally unchallenged. Unlike competitors like Lego or Mattel, Playmobil has proven unwilling to take the risks and court the controversy that would come from a more fundamental engagement with the structures of an unequal society. In the end, Playmobil effectively tinkers while maintaining the central pillars of a view of society that excludes and marginalizes.

The article’s analysis proceeds through two sections. The first examines a 2015 controversy that played out in print and social media over a Playmobil pirate ship and slavery. This section shows the competing racialized meanings that consumers invest in Playmobil’s products and, by exploring Playmobil’s unwillingness to court controversy, helps to explain the company’s changing representations of racial and ethnic difference since 1974.

The second section begins by surveying this history of representation, based on a comprehensive analysis of the company’s historical catalogues, and then engages in a detailed examination of its 2017 product line, which most effectively illustrates the brand’s recent turn toward limited inclusivity. This section provides the key findings by outlining in specific terms the company’s strategies and their historical roots. First, Playmobil has actively incorporated markers of racial and ethnic difference in representations of contemporary urban society while at the same time limiting them in ways that prevent concentrations of such difference. Second, the company has relied on strategic exclusions (Ger 2018; Veresiu and Giesler 2018) from symbolically resonant themes: the pastoral, heritage, and fantasy settings that lie at the heart of national origin myths. These practices elide and thereby reinforce a white majoritarian norm, hiding it in plain sight even without necessarily intending to do so (Davis 2018; Burton 2009a, 2009b). According to this norm, a commonplace within debates on citizenship across Europe, populations racialized and ethnicized as Others are only ever recent arrivals to and fundamental outsiders in a Europe never challenged by its postcolonial condition (Gilroy 2005; Stoler 2011; Wekker 2016). These particular strategies produce a banal appreciation of difference, one that allows the company and many consumers to

avoid confronting the abuses involved in and the transformations engendered by colonial histories and more recent mass migrations.

Beyond outlining these specific tactics, my chief scholarly contribution lies in the historical contextualization of Playmobil's choices (Askegaard and Linnet 2011). I demonstrate how they have been shaped by broad patterns of representation within Euro-American culture that date back over two centuries and continue to shape the conditions of social belonging today. Decades of scholarship in colonial and postcolonial studies and histories of race and racism have thoroughly established the centrality of racializing tropes to the visual and material culture of Europe and North America. Marketing has historically been implicated in the production and circulation of these tropes (Davis 2018), and regular controversies show that such themes are still symbolically resonant. This is especially true since Black Lives Matter effected an international reconsideration of previously uncontested advertising imagery (Thomas 2020; Morgan and Pritchard 2018; Borgerson and Schroeder 2002; Kennedy 2000; Back and Quaade 1993; Pieterse 1992). Drawing attention to the particular representational practices that marginalize even within a multicultural frame (Golpadas and Siebert 2018; Ger 2018; Shabbir 2014) will help companies that seek to challenge their own historical practices (Davis 2018; Licsandru and Cui 2018). It will also aid critics who want to pressure commercial actors to make substantial changes (Wei and Benjun 2020; Murji 2006; Müller 2008; Crockett 2008). Finally, this analysis of representations will provide a foundation for further research on what happens when children play with products imbued with implicit meanings (Jones and Rutland 2018; Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002), testing what Van Leeuwen (2009) calls the variable degrees of affordance and constraint within a toy company's semiotic system.

To summarize, this article argues that Playmobil's representations of racial and ethnic difference are inaccurate in ways that accord with longstanding patterns that marginalize those marked as racial and ethnic minorities. Comparisons with competitors at the end of the article and attention to the scholarly literature throughout will demonstrate that the company's choices have not been natural or inevitable, even if they have been made with little attention to historical structures of inequality and with a wary eye on consumers who might be turned off. Drawing attention to these design choices and placing them in their historical context is crucial for effectively confronting marginalizing trends and taking seriously any claim to inclusivity. I hope that my analysis will contribute to debates about how companies represent the world around us and will offer material for reflection within companies about the processes that lead to their design choices.

Data collection and terminology

This article is based on a discursive, semiotic analysis and a historical survey and contextualization of two bodies of material. The first collection of data comes from a survey of Playmobil's product catalogues from 1974 to the present, supplemented with the company's own promotional materials to explain their vision. When I began my research, the entire range of original German catalogues and more recent country-specific catalogues could be found on Playmobil's website. This allowed easy access to both the full range of product offerings and idealized visions of how children might play with them. Excepting the earliest catalogues, these are primarily visual sources with very little text, and so the analysis requires a "reading" of the images and their relationship to each other. Additionally, surveying the entire range of products through the catalogues, supplemented with information available through fan encyclopedias like *Klickypedia* (<https://www.klickypedia.com/>), allowed me to establish and record patterns of representation. I tracked figures' skin tones, social roles, gender, age, fashion markers, accessories, and settings, identifying consistent trends and changes from 1974 until the present. It is worth noting that there are some minor, market-specific differences between the original German catalogues and catalogues for other markets, most notably that historically products have been released for German consumers first and only in the next year for foreign markets. There are also small differences in emphasis from one context to the next, but

the general trends outlined below are consistent across all markets. Regrettably, when Playmobil updated the website to its current form, the collection of historical catalogues was not included. Fan forums now provide the best means for locating digital copies of past catalogues, while the most current print catalogues can be requested from the country-specific Playmobil sites.

If this material is useful for understanding Playmobil's design choices over time, I have collected a second body of data to understand the various meanings associated with the company's products. This material comes from surveys dating back to 2008 of German, American, and British media commentary and fan responses available online. I have collected fan responses from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter as well as from more traditional forums and discussion sites. Some of these forums, for example *Klickywelt* (<https://klickywelt.de/>) and *Playmofriends* (<https://www.playmofriends.com/>), are dedicated specifically to the world of Playmobil, while relevant discussions have also taken place in forums dedicated to a range of other cultural, social, or political issues. While Playmobil fans engage quite actively in these various platforms to share their memories and experiences, more traditional media only pay the company occasional attention. The most revealing discussions for the purposes of this analysis have tended to concentrate around controversies like that over the pirate slave discussed in detail just below or others that I mention in passing. These discussions tend to bring out disparities that otherwise are papered over in the shared online community-building encouraged by Playmobil and shaped by enthusiastic consumers (MacInnes and Folkes 2017; Wei and Benjun 2020).

Finally, a note on terminology is in order. Playmobil uses commonly understood stereotypical features to mark social groups racialized by their outward physical features and presumed site of "original" ancestry (e.g. as white, Black, Latinx, or South or East Asian), but the design choices also contain a host of ambiguities. Historically, Playmobil's human figures have come in only three skin colors. The original, foundational color is a light peach, and that is still the color of the vast majority of figures today. A dark brown was introduced in 1978, and this color has been used to mark Black and South Asian characters. In 1989 orange was first used to denote Native Americans, and since then Playmobil has used this color to mark lighter-skinned people of African or South Asian descent as well as Latinx and Arab characters. However, orange is also used to mark white people stereotypically presumed to have a darker complexion, for example an Italian Pizza Baker (product #6392), a Spanish Football/Soccer Player (#4721), or tanned white characters in summer holiday sets. Further, in 1990 Playmobil introduced its first explicitly (East) "Asian" figures (#3794). These figures have peach skin and semicircular eyes, rather than the circular eyes of other figures. Playmobil uses this feature to indicate the epicanthic fold stereotypically associated with East Asia, but this eye shape is also used to indicate an especially large smile on otherwise unidentified characters. Because of these ambiguities, I will always describe the toys with reference to these features rather than presuming an easy equivalence between colors and eye shapes and the unstable, racialized categories in which we often discuss the social order. A further note: because many sets have similar names and change regularly, whenever referring to a particular set I include product numbers in parentheses (#XXXX). Images can be found at the fan site *Klickypedia* (<https://www.klickypedia.com/>).

The "pirate slave" and race talk

In 2015 a complaint from a concerned mother created a controversy over a Playmobil pirate ship that played out in print and social media. The surrounding debate illustrates the competing racialized meanings consumers associate with Playmobil figures and how they reflect what Derald Wing Sue (2015) has called "a clash of racial realities." Critics of the controversial toy suggested that it reflected a broader system of structural inequality that was obvious to those disadvantaged by it, while Playmobil's defenders engaged in what Wetherell and Potter (1992) have called "race talk," discursive strategies deployed by members of the majority to deflect from and delegitimize such critiques. Debates such as this relatively small one over a particular toy do not merely *reveal* static and underlying

tensions over the operations of race. They *are* the discursive sites where tensions are re-enacted on an everyday basis and under unequal relations of power, as consumers forge their sense of self and coalesce temporarily into groups according to their positioning within the charged politics of race (Veresiu and Giesler 2018; Arnould and Thompson 2005). The detailed analysis of social media debates that follows will illustrate how Playmobil products are never entirely separate from discourses that limit the manner of inclusion for those racialized as minorities. The emotional attachments that conditioned competing consumers' critiques (Park and MacInnes 2018; MacInnes and Folkes 2017; Arvidsson and Caliendo 2016; Wei and Benjun 2020) also conditioned Playmobil's awkwardness and hesitancy when criticized for its banal incorporation of difference. Unlike competitors Lego and Mattel, Playmobil has proved unwilling to be drawn into controversial debates, which allows for the easy perpetuation of subtly exclusionary representations, as discussed in the next section.

In October 2015 Ida Lockett, an African-American mother in California, raised concerns on Facebook over racism in Playmobil toys. Her son, for his fifth birthday, had received the elaborate "Large Pirate Ship" (#5135) from his aunt, Aimee Norman, who had chosen the set because three of the four crew members were orange, a color that she associated with darker skin tones. As Lockett assembled the set, she received a shock. The last page of the instructions directed her to place a gray collar around the neck of one of the smiling orange pirates, even providing a helpful illustration to show how it clips around the throat of the smiling man. This pirate wears tattered and torn clothes that reveal a hairy chest and bare feet and is a figure who, despite his smile, seems to have known some suffering. (Figure 1) Confronted with these features, Lockett was horrified at the thought that her son had received a "pirate slave" for his birthday.

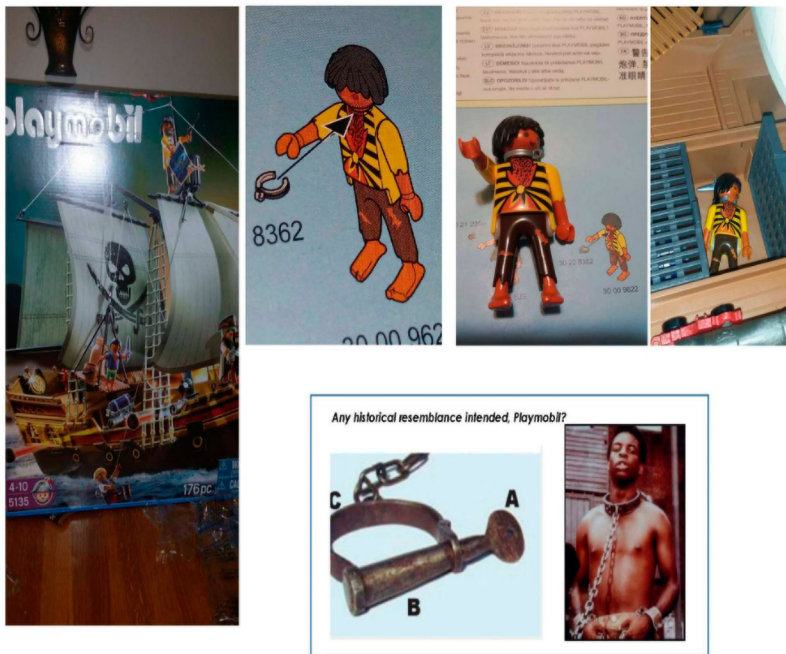


Figure 1. Image used by Aimee Norman to illustrate her post on Facebook, 6 October 2015.

Lockett took to social media to express her displeasure, seek support, and demand a response. She took pictures of the figure and the instructions and posted them on her own and Playmobil's Facebook pages (Lockett 2015). She annotated them with brief comments of shock and dismay while Norman posted a much longer statement. With references to the television series *Roots* and the film *Twelve Years a Slave*, Norman protested that the inclusion of a slave in a toy set was

obscene, even moreso [*sic*] given the marked absence of diversity in your entire toy line.

#Slavery.is.not.a.game. Playmobil

What is wrong with you???? (Norman 2015)

Beyond her central point that inviting children to play at slavery was inappropriate, she decried the general reduction of Black figures to slaves, asking why Playmobil could not “just create a regular old black pirate.” The story was quickly picked up by local media, and the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People offered support by demanding that the toy be removed from shelves immediately (CBS 2015).

A few days later Playmobil offered a brief statement on Twitter (Playmobil 2015) defending the product (Figures 2–3).



Figure 2. Playmobil’s official response on Twitter, 8 October 2015.



Figure 3. Playmobil’s official response on Twitter, 8 October 2015.

Highlighting the figure’s equal status on the ship, the anonymous spokesperson pointed to the illustrations on the packaging and other promotional materials, which show the figure not barred in the hold but rather navigating from the crow’s nest (while wearing his collar) and manning a cannon (without the collar). By claiming historical accuracy, the spokesperson attempted to relieve the company of responsibility for any offense taken, and the insistence on the figure’s equality in a seventeenth-century context even awkwardly suggested the toy represented a celebration of diversity. The American and international press also reported on the story, and the attention produced a

brief swell of online commentary before the controversy blew over.¹ The only lasting consequence was the quiet cancellation of the pirate ship in question and its replacement by a new model (#6678) the following year. The new ship featured an orange pirate captain and two crewmen, one peach and one brown, and no shackles of any sort.

In the broadest sense, this controversy illustrates how a charge of racism in a product with such devoted customers provoked a form of “race talk” in which many defenders of Playmobil absolved the company and themselves of prejudice by marginalizing minorities’ experiences of inequality. Agoustinos and Every (2007), catalogue patterns of such racial discourse that are evident in the responses to Lockett and Norman’s critique, including 1) denial of prejudice, 2) assigning negative characteristics to the original complainants, 3) rejection of the relevance of race to the issue, and 4) claiming their views were grounded in a presumed external reality (“historical accuracy”) rather than in their own particular experiences. These techniques represented various ways of evading the central complaint: to invite children to play at slavery was to ask them to imagine themselves within an abusive and violent system whose legacies continue to shape the lives of Black and white people in manifold and unequal ways. By frustrating an uncomfortable engagement with systems of American racism, as Agoustinos and Every suggest, such strategies rationalized and perpetuated the systems of inequality under critique.

A number of respondents who identified themselves as devoted fans denied that Playmobil could even produce an offensive product, pointing to the apparent diversity of their offerings. In the words of one defender of the brand, “Poorly Diversed? [*sic*] If you actually look at their toys they have several skin tones including African, Asian and Hispanic figures.” These commentators followed a pattern described by Ahmed (2012), focusing not on the harm done to the accuser but rather on the supposed harm done to the accused company. Given how closely they identified with the brand itself, what Park and MacInnes (2018) refer to as self-relevance, these commentators also treated the accusations as harm done against themselves. Many responses were correspondingly filled with abusive personal attacks, using obscene insults or insisting that “People who take offense at such things as this need to move to another country.” Many suggested that Lockett and Norman were ignorant or lazy or accused them of cynically and selfishly “playing the race card” to get attention, “hoping that some scumbag lawyer will try to get you some money for all your ‘pain and suffering’ this has caused.” Others associated them with an agenda of “political correctness” or a culture of self-victimization among African Americans generally. One commentator with a self-proclaimed Irish heritage drew an unflattering comparison to suggest what happens when groups live in the past: “I am Irish and the Irish were spurned and rejected when they first came to America. I don’t let that stop me from living and trying to succeed today.”

Many tried to deracialize the issue, echoing a point raised by one commentator that “y’all think everything is racist and it is not.” Some used bizarre classification schemes to fix the orange character’s race as something other than Black, for example suggesting that “This slave appears to be a native of Latin America, not Africa ... is somebody trying to get paid?” Others criticized the predominant association of enslaved people with Blackness, arguing along with another commenter that “pirates took slaves & prisoners of all races” or cautioning, as one respondent did, “let’s not forget the millions of white slaves.” Others sought more explicitly to diminish the role of whites in propagating slavery by noting that African leaders (or “black native africkin’ slave traders” in the inflammatory words of one participant in these discussions) had been involved in the slave trade as well. While some posts were calm and considered, most were sarcastic or insulting or exclamatory. Perhaps the most emphatic response rejected the very premise that the toy had anything to

¹The quotations in the rest of this section come from two intertwined threads on Facebook, where most of the debate took place. Aimee Norman’s Facebook page, 6 October 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1351405728219971&set=o.103744793656&type=3>; Ed Fox’s Facebook page, 9 October 2015, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=749143588523947&id=119512978153681.

do with either slavery or race: “It’s a PIRATE ship!!!!!!!!!!!!. NOT a SLAVE TRADE ship. Pirates took prisoners. Get it right!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Based on the idea that race was not relevant, many commentators complained that Lockett and Norman took offense too easily over an insignificant matter. In one respondent’s dismissive view,

Who would’ve thought in the year 2015 people are still sensitive about slaves? Slavery happened. Whether you wanna pretend it didn’t or not is up to you. But the fact you are “Mortified” is a joke. This whole world has turned into a bunch of sensitive cry babies. Pirates were bad people. Your [*sic*] just stupid.

Despite such accusations of over-sensitivity, these commentators’ own sensitivity was obvious in their emotional responses. This was especially apparent in those that suggested that Lockett and Norman’s personal “hangup” would unjustly impose a cost on those who did not see a problem. One post made this explicit when it asked, “And if you can’t help yourself, why not just choose to buy it/throw it out, instead of removing a fun toy for everyone else’s children?”

Efforts to diminish the relevance of race to the issue were bound up ironically with arguments based on claims to historical accuracy. In many posts, some of which were quite abusive, respondents followed Playmobil in insisting the toy was historically accurate but went further, arguing that Lockett and Norman’s complaint amounted to an effort to deny or re-write history. Maritime historian Ed Fox summarized the case in a polite post that nevertheless evaded the original criticism of the “pirate slave.” Writing as a published expert on the history of pirates, he suggested that parents who did not want their children playing with a slave figure were failing to place that toy in its proper historical context. He noted that pirates “were nasty brutish criminals,” and yet parents encourage their kids to imagine themselves as pirates. Given this, he asked why parents would be offended by a toy representing a slave who had been freed and treated as an equal by those same pirates, which the historical record showed was a common practice at the time. Implying a measure of hypocrisy in the willingness to glorify murderous pirates but not the freedom of former slaves, Fox finished with a grand injunction: “But what we should not do, ever, is pretend slavery didn’t happen. We should not ignore it, sweep it under the carpet, or hide it from our children” (Fox 2015).

There is a certain degree of blindness apparent when commenters, most of whom presented as white, lectured African-American caregivers not to hide the history of slavery and discrimination from their children. This is especially evident given the reluctance of these commentators to engage with Norman’s central points: that it was precisely this history that produced differential experiences of race in the present and that these experiences would be engaged if Black and white children were to play at slavery. Rather than drawing an analogy with playing at piracy, which has little political valence in the present, Lockett, Norman, and their supporters drew other analogies to make their point. One commentator considered the whole issue a minor matter but sympathized with the initial complaint, reasoning that “If they made a toy portraying the holocaust, I wouldn’t want my child playing and thinking ‘kill Jewish people’ even if that’s historically correct.” Another commenter noted that “9/11 is a historical fact as well but I’m sure merica [*sic*] would be in an uproar with replicas of the twin towers and innocent victims.” Less sarcastically, Norman argued that “the teachable moment is that we don’t play slavery, just like we don’t play rape.”

Comparing playing at slavery, which many commentators considered acceptable or even necessary, with these atrocities outraged many respondents, provoking one to “question your mental state for having even said something so crazy.” The provocation was effective, though, because such comparisons undermined the insistence that slavery, discrimination, and racism were merely history and should be treated at some remove from the present. It was the very contemporaneity of racism that lay at the heart of Lockett’s and Norman’s critiques of the “pirate slave.” As Norman put it in response to Fox’s post,

In the US, slavery is not a distant historical happening. It was the breath and blood of only a few generations gone (not to mention its more recent lingering vestiges of segregation and Jim Crow laws). I am aware that many people whose personal history is not entwined in this reality do not understand the deeper feelings and reactions this play set may evoke for others.

In response, one disgusted commenter rejected the notion of any such entwined personal history.

Aimee Norman Could you share the instructions where the company said, “Aimee Norman, you need to place the slave collar on your neck.” If these instructions exist with your name or your loved ones name’s [sic] then I’ll agree there is a racist context within the game. Until you can provide this information, please stop spewing garbage.

The often aggressive rejection of connections between the past and present and between the personal and political, manifested in the “race talk” tactics outlined by Agoustinos and Every (2007), served to confirm the contemporaneity of racism as well as the challenge of addressing it through debates on social media.

This brief controversy over a “pirate slave” posed risks for Playmobil’s carefully crafted brand identity, which is based around the imagery of innocent children engaged in free, imaginative play, supported by loving adults. Like other major toy companies, Playmobil cultivates a sense of a brand community joined by these sorts of childhood memories and experiences. This arguably produces a particularly powerful affect for toy consumers, who may have established brand-self connections at a young age and, as adults, wish to connect with their own children or their younger selves (MacInnes and Folkes 2017). This sense of common experience was directly challenged by the racialized meanings that consumers attach to Playmobil figures, meanings based in their clashing personal experiences of race, history, and belonging (Sue 2015). It is important to note that such meanings are not inherent to the toy itself, but, as this case shows, the producer’s response influences the range of meanings associated with it (Wei and Benjun 2020). This becomes especially evident given that the “pirate slave” was not originally intended to be a slave. As a digital storybook on Playmobil’s US and UK websites at the time made clear (2015), the collared orange prisoner was not escaping slavery at all but rather a military jail. A similar prisoner had featured in earlier naval prison sets (#3859, #3112), and designers moved it into the pirate ship in question in 2011, where it stayed without drawing attention until this controversy.

Given the toy’s apparent connection to naval imprisonment, why did the Playmobil spokesperson confirm the presumption that the collar must indicate a slave past? Perhaps the spokesperson was simply unaware, or perhaps a more accurate response would have been embarrassing. After all, how did developers miss the possibility that a colonial-era, non-white character wearing tattered clothes and a collar could be associated with slavery? Lack of access to company archives or personnel means that internal deliberations on the pirate ship and public relations response remain opaque. The Playmobil spokesperson may have intended the company’s response to be neutral, a way of acknowledging the issue while also diminishing the threat it posed to a harmonious brand community. However, the insistence on historical accuracy and a banal celebration of diversity revealed a certain clumsiness and hesitancy when dealing with questions of inequality and difference. In part this can be explained by the company’s unwillingness to alienate loyal customers, some of whom took the company’s response as an endorsement of their frustrations and even an inducement to attack Norman, Lockett, and other critics. But the response also reflects the company’s ambivalent efforts to change how it represents race and ethnicity. As the next section will show, Playmobil has quietly incorporated markers of difference as part of an inclusive vision of Euro-American society, but designers’ and marketers’ efforts are marked by persistent blind spots and patterns that perpetuate historical trends, diminishing or even erasing the presence of those marked as outsiders by race or ethnicity. As Norman and Lockett understood, these practices affect the worlds that children can imagine through Playmobil toys.

No limits on the imagination? Playmobil and marginalizing myths

Playmobil’s founding philosophy is to create unlimited possibilities for imaginative play by providing children with accurate representations of “western” society, its histories, and its fantasies. After surveying its guiding principles, I will briefly summarize how the company has introduced racial

and ethnic difference into its products over its history. I will suggest that we can best understand these choices in the context of the changing demographics of the Federal Republic of Germany and western Europe more generally since the 1960s. The arrival of large numbers of foreign workers and their families and refugees challenged prevailing myths of social homogeneity and provoked essentialist discursive reactions that marginalized or even erased these new arrivals. These myths have been reflected in Playmobil's toy lines, putting very real limits on the imaginative worlds that children can create. This brief historical survey will lay the foundation for a focused analysis of Playmobil's 2017 catalogue, which offers a particularly clear illustration of the operations of the "banal multiculturalism" (Thomas 2011) that has characterized the company's incorporation of racial and ethnic difference. While moving toward an active incorporation of markers of racial and ethnic difference, this incorporation has been marked by a flattening of contemporary demographic patterns as well as exclusions from the pastoral, fantasy, and heritage settings at the heart of European and American founding myths. Exploring how Playmobil enacts these strategies lays the foundation for comparing its choices with those of competing toymakers and other firms purporting to represent society fairly and accurately.

From its beginnings in 1974, Playmobil has marketed its products as both entertaining and educational, with the educational value bound up in the "true-to-life role play" (Playmobil 1977, 1) the toys were meant to encourage. The strategy, a common one that runs through the history of the modern toy industry, emphasizes the development of autonomy through the free play of a child's imagination (Cross 2012; Stearns 2017). Playmobil's founding designer, Hans Beck, wanted to produce figures that accurately, if also playfully, reflected the realities and fantasies of their society. With familiar figures in hand, children could mix and match as they pleased, and the endless imaginative worlds they created would help them safely explore their world (Bachmann 2006; Köpper 2014; Haug 2004).

At the core of this company philosophy is a commitment to accuracy that Playmobil continues to draw upon, as the response to the "pirate slave" controversy suggests. However, as von Holzen (2017) suggests, Playmobil toys have become increasingly fantastical and are not accurate in any literal sense. Rather, Playmobil's ever-evolving and expanding contemporary, historical, and fantasy settings are filled out with reductive caricatures that evoke fanciful but recognizable stereotypes. Doctors and nurses wear red crosses and carry stethoscopes, and burglars wear woolen caps and striped shirts. Knights are burdened with unreasonably decorative armor, Vikings are adorned with horned helmets, and contemporary Alpine residents are dressed in something akin to *Dirndls* and *Lederhosen*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Native Americans cobble together a *mélange* of features drawn from across North America in the nineteenth century: canoes from the eastern forests, teepees and feathered headdresses from the Plains, graphic designs from the American Southwest, and totem poles from the Pacific coast (Deloria 2004; Hirschfelder, Fairbanks, and Wakim 1999).

Playmobil (1975, 2–3) has claimed that its toys "set no limits on the imagination" because children can take their play in any direction they choose. However, the nature of representation does impose limits insofar as it relies on assumptions and stereotypes that work to marginalize or exclude (Van Leeuwen 2009), as Szabo (2014) and von Holzen (2017) have shown to be true in terms of gender roles, for example. There is a similar limiting process at work in Playmobil's depictions of racial and ethnic difference, which have channeled trends in western European discourses on race, nation, and migration. From the 1940s, western European states recruited workers from abroad to recover from wartime devastation and fill necessary services, but the economic crash of the early 1970s, the very moment when Playmobil was established, led governments to try to halt and reverse these migration patterns. As these efforts failed, discussions around migrants and migration became characterized by what Bade (2003, 231) calls a "xenophobic, culturalist discourse" and a corresponding emphasis on coercive integration policies. As Chin (2017) demonstrates, these were part of a new, racialized politics of national belonging. Political leaders across western Europe defined migrants from Turkey, Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia as "the bearers of alien cultures that now rendered them 'inassimilable' to the nation" (Chin 2017, 6). Their

presence and any burgeoning efforts to build multiethnic societies were presented as challenges to the myths of national homogeneity and social cohesion that had helped reestablish political order after 1945.

El-Tayeb (2011) has used the concept of “ethnicization” to explain this process and argues that it was closely intertwined with discredited processes of explicitly racial differentiation. Popular discourses on “visible minorities” associated supposedly innate cultural differences with non-European origins, similarly with outward features like darker skin tone or clothing associated with Muslim practice. Such persistent associations meant these populations were imagined as permanent aliens despite long-term residence, integration into the labor market, and even citizenship. El-Tayeb argues that these constructions of “cultural” alienness have buttressed a European ethnicity based on a normative whiteness while, at the same time, making it possible to imagine Europe as a continent utterly without race and racism. Imagining Europe as both colorblind and homogenous has required, as Ann Laura Stoler (2011) puts it, “active dissociation” from histories of colonial encounters and violence, labor migration and exploitation, and religious pluralism and conflict. Such erasures have made it possible to see the era of postwar migration as an unprecedented injection of difference, an interruption in otherwise continuous histories that reach back to mythical national origins and a shared European heritage.

A thorough survey of all of Playmobil’s catalogues since 1974 illustrates this racialized process of ethnicization and its links to myths of national homogeneity and continuity. This is most immediately evident in the fact that figures meant to represent non-white characters, marked by brown or orange skin or semicircular eyes, generally have been assigned to times or places distant from contemporary Europe: in the American “Wild West,” among the pirates of the Caribbean, on safari in Africa, researching in the Arctic, or in a futuristic space environment. Some of these sets have trafficked in the crassest of colonialist stereotypes of primitive savagery; the most notorious in this regard was the Jungle series that featured peach Indiana Jones-style explorers confronting brown “Jungle Natives” (e.g. #30008140) dressed in animal pelts, feathers, grotesque masks, and loincloths. Continuing another tradition dating back to the Age of Empire (Bowersox 2013), brown and orange figures have also been concentrated in circus and zoo sets that associated them with wild animals and allowed them to be dressed in exoticized fashions like a fez or turban.

When these figures were included in sets depicting contemporary European city life, they were introduced as little more than very occasional tokenistic figures meant to show an interest in diversity without challenging prevailing modes of representation organized around a white norm. At first this was literally true: from 1985 until 1993 catalogues included brown figures in illustrations for suggested play even when there were none for sale in those sets. But even as brown and orange figures were haltingly introduced, they most often occupied subordinate or serving roles and in very small numbers that belied the actual concentrations of people of color and migrants in urban environments. They also often received ethnicized or racialized labels that positioned them relative to an implicit white norm, for example the brown “England player black” (#4736) meant to complement the peach but deracialized “Soccer player – England” (#4732). From 2009 there has been an apparent effort to move beyond tokenism and to introduce brown, orange, and peach figures with semicircular eyes more broadly across sets. Even still, this incorporation has been limited by practices that both ensure representation and prevent concentrations of these figures. Their incorporation has also been characterized by significant absences in symbolically resonant sets like the pastoral, historical, and fantasy themes that have been central to myths of national identity since the dawn of the age of nationalism. As such, Playmobil’s most recent strategy has relied upon markers of racial and ethnic difference to promote Thomas’s (2011) positive but banal vision of multicultural diversity, one that remains wedded to the normative whiteness that El-Tayeb (2011) describes. It has limited the ability to encompass the range of experiences of people of color in the present and to imagine people of color into the myths that underpin the social order across Europe and North America.

Table 1. Distribution of figures within Playmobil's 2017 German catalogue.

Type	Total	Total Adult	Men	Women	Total Children	Boy	Girl	Baby/ Unclear
Peach/circular eyes	467	366	232	134	101	40	49	12
Peach/semicircular eyes	14	10	5	5	4	4	0	0
Orange	35	29	22	7	6	3	2	1
Brown	31	22	14	8	9	3	4	2
Total	547	427	273	154	120	50	55	15

These trends come into sharper focus if we look more closely at a single, recent case study, and I have chosen the 2017 German catalogue because it best highlights the trends under discussion. A statistical overview of the features Playmobil regularly uses to mark racial or ethnic difference (Table 1) provides a foundation for assessing the particular patterns within the catalogue: these numbers exclude non-human figures like monsters, ghosts and aliens, and they also exclude movie tie-in sets promoting the *Ghostbusters* and *Dragons* film franchises, since they stand outside my effort to understand how Playmobil represents the world more generically. In the catalogue, the vast majority of figures, roughly 85 percent, feature the peach skin and circular eyes that are the norm in the Playmobil world; these figures predominate in every theme, and their number was actually lower in 2017 than in other years because of the Romans and Egyptians series, discussed below. Just under 6 percent are brown, while roughly 2.5 percent of the figures have peach skin with semicircular eyes. Just over 6 percent are orange, and this includes two figures with semicircular eyes in an Arctic theme, seemingly to represent Inuit populations. As mentioned at the outset, it is important to note that these percentages are only broadly indicative, as there is some indeterminacy about what these features can represent.

As broad indicators, though, categorizing by these features reveals a tokenistic diversity that enables a multicultural visibility of difference while flattening out the real diversity of the present. With significant exceptions to be outlined below, each theme representing contemporary society is made up of roughly 10–20 percent of brown, orange, or peach figures with semicircular eyes. It is important to note that in these sets the figures are otherwise indistinguishable in terms of fashion and role from their peach counterparts with circular eyes. For example, both the police and the fire department themes include one brown male and one orange male figure out of a total of seventeen and thirteen respectively, and they are dressed and performing the same roles as their colleagues. Similarly, a shopping theme with nineteen figures in all features two peach women with semicircular eyes, one orange woman, and one brown woman. These figures are all depicted as consumers and not mall employees: they wear fashionable, interchangeable clothing, and they are depicted withdrawing cash from an ATM, carrying a purse while shopping for a skirt, and being sold flowers by a peach attendant. Generally, across the themes representing contemporary Euro-American urban society, there is an evident effort to include a representative sample of markers to indicate an awareness of diversity, and Playmobil appears sensitive to the risk of associating these figures with subordinate or otherwise marginalizing roles associated with working-class employment. Outside rescue workers, police officers, and medical professionals, the only such figure represented “at work” is an orange security guard at the airport (#5338). In this way, Playmobil presents a vision of a cosmopolitan, consumerist society based on the equal participation of ethnicized populations.

This manner of inclusion both makes ethnic difference visible and, by avoiding concentrations of ethnic difference, reinforces a white norm. There are never more than a handful of non-normative figures in any single theme, and they are almost always accompanied by a peach counterpart with circular eyes, perhaps reflecting a concern that consumers would not buy them on their own: of the forty-eight brown, orange, or peach figures with semicircular eyes in contemporary sets, only five come unaccompanied (#9257, #6969, #9251, #6692, #5309). There are also only two sets that include more than one such figure (#5567, #9272), and in both sets they are outnumbered by peach figures with circular eyes. The effect is an apparent statistical limit that might seem a reasonable

representation of the non-white population of an entire country or continent but that, in practice, is far from Playmobil's goal of accurate representation of contemporary urban society. It is difficult to gather consistent data on race, ethnic difference, and migration status across Europe, but European cities have large concentrations of people of color and ethnicized migrants (Arapoglou 2012; Berg and Sigona 2013; Farkas 2017), in numbers often far higher than the limits found in Playmobil catalogues. Put simply, a child would be hard-pressed to reproduce common scenes from neighborhoods in London's Brixton, Berlin-Kreuzberg, Seine-Saint-Denis outside of Paris, or the many parts of cities and towns across Europe and North America where these blunt markers of ethnic difference would be found in the majority rather than the minority.

Avoiding concentrations of difference limits not only how urban life is imagined but also families. The apparent effort to avoid concentrations of non-normative figures means that, in school and leisure sets that included children, designers have had to choose between having an adult or a child as the token figure. As a result, in the 2017 catalogue brown, orange, or peach children with semicircular eyes are generally not sold or advertised with parents or carers who look like them. The result can be seen in a set like Aquarium Shop (#9061), which includes four peach figures with circular eyes—a man, a woman, and two children—and one orange child. The box illustration for this set suggests that the man is a cashier and the woman is responsible for the children, while another illustration in the catalogue places the orange child in the company of a figure from a different set, a peach man with circular eyes. However the figures are arranged, the set implies multiracial families or social units connecting families of different ethnicities, and it is not unique. Similar sets featuring adults and children with different appearances abound in the 2017 German catalogue (#6927, #6661, #6662, #6686, #6657, #5572, #5567, #9230) and have featured regularly since 2010. There is only one exception, a brown man and baby included as part of a Housewarming set (#9272), but even here they are accompanied by a peach woman and three peach children with circular eyes.

The frequency of these implicitly multiracial families can be read as a rebuke to those who object to mixing across these categories of difference. At the same time, the obvious absences in these families suggests that their inclusion represents what Parker and Song (2001, 1) have described as “a naïve celebration of ‘mixed-race’ relationships and children as ‘living proof’ of the transcendence of racism and the ultimate expression of multicultural harmony.” In particular, the absence of a presumed parent who resembles the child of color leaves these families incomplete, and this also imposes real practical challenges on parents and children who want to build a family of color. In 2017, assembling such a family from the options available in catalogues and most stores would have required purchasing multiple and possibly incongruous sets, making racial inclusion a conscious adult choice only available to those with the means to do so.

In an apparent recognition of this limitation, in more recent years Playmobil has introduced new family sets featuring brown and orange parents with children, although still always with a peach figure with circular eyes (e.g. #9422, #9424). They have also expanded the diversity of individual “basic figures” (*Grundfiguren*), generic supplementary figures available online and at a slightly higher price. However, these are not showcased in the catalogues but rather shunted into the “add-ons and accessories” section and only on the German website. Whether a result of conscious intention or the incidental product of a system of quotas, the presumption that a family unit should include a figure that connotes whiteness reflects the limits of multicultural inclusion within the world of Playmobil more generally.

These limits are also apparent in the deployment of brown, orange, and peach figures with semicircular eyes in the themes that are most central to racialized myths of national origin and a common European heritage: rural life, fantasy, and history. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these themes were bound together into a complex that allowed for the imagining of a new time—modernity—which moves in a linear fashion toward rational progress and nation-building. As Reinhart Koselleck (1985) argues, this new concept of modern time allowed for the hierarchical assessment of different rates of development according to a Eurocentric standard, and

establishing this standard required defining temporal and geographic “Others” who existed in some prior state of development. A more barbaric or simpler European Middle Ages provided one such foil, as did a romanticized European countryside that sat outside of time and thus preserved traces of particular folk roots. These Others were incorporated into narratives of progressive European national development, while the wider world came to be defined as outside of modernity altogether. To use Johannes Fabian’s (2014) term, the wider world was denied “coevalness,” a temporalizing strategy that used various physiognomic or cultural factors to mark distant but contemporary societies as primitive or stuck in the past. As Barnor Hesse (2007, 643) puts it, such oppositions make it clear that “modernity is racial,” and yet this fact has been persistently elided by “white mythologies” that interrogate modernity without attention to colonial and racial formations.

The racialized celebration of European heritage and tradition as found in Playmobil’s rural, fantasy, and history themes reflects one such mythology on a more popular level, hiding normative whiteness in plain sight. For example, depictions of racial and ethnic diversity in contemporary rural settings diverge significantly from the depictions of contemporary urban society described above. A Mountain theme includes a single brown figure among eighteen enjoying the outdoors, and he was the first such figure ever included in the theme. The Farm theme does not have even this level of diversity. It is the only theme in the 2017 catalogue that does not include a brown, orange, or peach figure with semicircular eyes; indeed, only in 2019 did the Farm theme receive its first brown (#70137) and orange (#70133) figures. In these rural themes, Playmobil reflects what scholars like Michael Woods (2016) and Daniel Lichter (2012) identify as a common pattern of under-stating the diversity of small towns and rural areas across Europe and North America. As Charlotte Williams (2007) puts it, this pattern works to detach the countryside from prevailing narratives of race, preserving it as an idyllic repository of national traditions.

Fantasy and fairy tales are at the heart of these national traditions, “shadowing modernity” in David Matthews’s words (2015, 1). As a range of scholars have shown (Utz 2017; Saler 2006), romanticized depictions of the Middle Ages or of folk culture served as a static foil for imagining a new modern era and also as a source of the enchantment that cultural pessimists feared had been lost in the turn to modernity. Playmobil has embodied this enchantment through romantic castles with princesses, sylvan glades with magical creatures, and medievalist fortresses with armored knights battling trolls and dwarves. But the enchantment has been bound up with racialized patterns of absence and marginalization that contrast with the depictions of contemporary urban society described above.

The Princess theme, for example, reflects a very recent effort to introduce racial and ethnic difference, receiving its first non-normative figures only in 2016. In the 2017 catalogue it features a total of twenty-one figures with elaborate fashions, furniture, carriages, and horses appropriate for the fairy tale castle that is its centerpiece. The theme almost meets the general quota found in the urban themes with two figures: a finely dressed peach woman with semicircular eyes in the Royal Stable (#6855) and an orange woman trying on clothes in the Dressing Room with Salon (#6850). The detailed product descriptions found on their boxes identify them as princesses, and the orange woman even wears a pink crown, but it is noteworthy that the title of each set is generic. By contrast, ten other figures in this theme, all peach with circular eyes, are explicitly identified as royalty, for example the Royal Couple with Horse-Drawn Carriage (#6856) or the Princesses’ Playroom (#6852). The Fairy forests are less diverse still than the Princesses’ castle. Among its sixteen figures there is only a token brown fairy who rides a Romantic Fairy Ship (#9133) with two peach fairies with circular eyes. Similarly, the human figures in the Knights theme are strikingly monochromatic. In the 2017 catalogue there are twenty-eight male figures, almost all of whom wear fantastical armour and bear fearsome weapons. All are peach with circular eyes with the exception of an orange peasant driving an oxcart (#6005), a representation that denies even the possibility of a non-white warrior in a mythologized European space.

These fantastical depictions leave little room for historical and symbolic encounters with difference in the medieval and early modern periods, represented for example in the Saracen and

Moorish knights of Arthurian legends: Safir, Palamedes, Segwarides, Morien, and Feirefiz. As Cohen and Steel suggest (2015), a wide range of encounters with difference took place on the Welsh borders, in Islamic Spain, or on Viking journeys to North America and the Levant, and they did not operate according to the racial and ethnic markers that conventionally are imposed on the era from a contemporary perspective. As such, far from being accurate or natural depictions, the norm defended in the “pirate slave” debate, Playmobil’s fantasy sets reproduce the racialized narratives of purity and continuity at the heart of concepts of modernity, Europeaness, and national identity in operation since the eighteenth century. As Helen Young notes (2016, 10–11), these are conventions that have long “formed habits of Whiteness” within the fantasy genre that “simultaneously influence who can be present, and what is seen, thought, and done, by creating patterns of bodies and spaces alike.”

The racialization of the European past relies on the containment of visible difference within and its displacement beyond Europe’s imagined boundaries, and this pattern is strikingly apparent in Playmobil’s award-winning history series depicting the Romans and Egyptians. This theme is masterfully designed with elaborate vehicles, a complex pyramid with a pharaoh waiting for entombment (#5386), and beautifully detailed costumes. Caesar meets with Cleopatra (#5386), there are a wide variety of Roman and Egyptian soldiers and bandits, and the website offers supplementary Roman and Egyptian families for playing at more mundane social relations. For our purposes, the most noteworthy feature of the theme is a binary opposition between peach Romans with circular eyes and orange Egyptians, some of whom have heavily lined eyes drawn from ancient Egyptian art. The exception who proves the rule is Cleopatra, who, alone among the Egyptians, is peach. Her implicit whiteness sits within a long tradition of depicting the queen as an icon of white beauty, but also, given the orangeness around her, is a rebuke to those who have claimed her for Blackness. The point here is not the color of the historical Cleopatra’s skin but rather, in Joyce Green MacDonald’s words (2002, 36), a “flattened racial identification.” The only nods to the reality in which both Rome and Egypt governed over vast and diverse territories are a brown Nubian warrior in the pick-and-mix Figures Series 10 (#6840) and a set of gladiators (#6868) that includes an orange fighter armed with trident and net.

The binary opposition of the Romans and Egyptians reflects the normative whiteness that runs through the entire Playmobil world, which requires that ethnicized figures within modern Europe be contained and any concentrations be displaced beyond its temporal and geographic boundaries. In this way, Playmobil uncritically reproduces racialized concepts of Europe and the nation as they were first popularized in the nineteenth century and then adapted over the twentieth. This vision, in a playfully caricatured form, is then imposed on the past and the present. It erases the complexity of contemporary Europe, and it marginalizes the experiences and perspectives of those ethnicized populations who are marked as permanent outsiders.

Conclusion

Like all toy companies, Playmobil must make choices about how to depict a diverse society in reductionist ways, and its fantasy vision of a harmonious society often hides its ideological operations. In part, this results from practical considerations about how much authenticity is acceptable to consumers. For example, as per Hans Beck’s own initial concept for Playmobil, depictions of violence remain sanitized. It is either cordoned off in a romanticized past or represented by heavily armed but smiling police officers chasing cartoonish villains who are always peach; there is no echo of the disproportionate state violence exercised against racialized minorities, especially Black citizens, that has animated the Black Lives Matter campaigns. Likewise, there are no depictions of poverty, homelessness, or mental illness. Class inequalities and their intersections with race and gender are largely hidden as well. Although many figures do represent service employees, we do not see their lives outside of the workplace. There are no one-bedroom flats, only mansions, and the leisure world presented is a consumerist one that does not encourage children to think about disparities of income and access.

In a similar manner, Playmobil's incorporation of racial and ethnic difference is anodyne, as per Thomas's (2011) notion of "banal multiculturalism" that appreciates difference but does not confront racialized structures. The company has quietly responded to public criticism with noteworthy changes in recent years. Playmobil revised the "pirate slave" ship discussed above, and in 2014 it stopped producing sets including the controversial Dutch figure *Zwarte Piet* (#4893, #5040, #5206, #5217), but only after a court ruled that the character was offensive. Complaints about the labelling of peach and brown England and France footballers in 2012 led to more neutral designations, although the company has yet to accede to requests for a wider range of German footballers. Playmobil has retired a number of series that only include peach figures with circular eyes and no longer uses the crude colonial stereotypes that featured regularly in earlier years. Playmobil has also introduced brown, orange, and peach figures with semicircular eyes in areas where they have been underrepresented within Euro-American popular culture more generally, include as ice hockey players, astronauts, scientists, and action heroes. In this regard, the company stands ahead of competitors like *Schleich*, which sells only a single person of color (Sarah) among all its highly realistic human figurines, or *Kinder Surprise*, which has a history of hiding racist figurines in its chocolate eggs.

However, avoiding controversy also has meant avoiding any overt association with critical self-reflection. This contrasts with major competitors like Mattel or Lego, not to mention smaller companies like those mentioned in the introduction. Despite its historically problematic depictions of feminine gender roles and racial or ethnic Others, in the 2010s Mattel overhauled its Barbie line to more publicly embrace inclusivity and empowerment (Piñon 2019). The company produced dolls modelled on prominent women of color and actively broadened the range of hair styles, skin tone, fashion accessories and body types to better reflect the range of girls playing with the toys. Just as importantly, they accompanied these efforts with public relations campaigns that both trumpeted their efforts and invited feedback of all sorts. Similarly, the world's largest toymaker Lego has also publicly made a commitment to overcoming historic under-representation a central part of its toy design and marketing. This has been reflected in attention-grabbing toys like the "Women of NASA" set modelled on the film *Hidden Figures* and, more notably, through changes in organizational priorities (Lego 2021). Neither Lego nor Mattel has been free of mis-steps over this time (Weinstock 2015), and more research is needed on the particular strategies of representation and the relationship to company structure and design practices. However, the salient point here is that their confrontation with historical practices and contemporary representations has been public and explicit, and thus open to investigation and critique. By contrast, as Playmobil's press officer Björn Seeger put it to me in a 21 June 2017 email, "diversity dips into our game worlds in many facets but is not an explicit criterion for the development of products." The company prefers to remain publicly disengaged on this issue and, as the "pirate slave" controversy suggests, is unwilling to alienate fans who resist considering unfamiliar "racial realities."

Responding in piecemeal fashion to individual complaints and remaining otherwise disengaged may avoid broader controversy, but it is not a neutral stance. Reflecting broader discourses that ethnicize people of color and recent migrants, Playmobil's world makes racial and ethnic difference visible but also contains it. By limiting its appearance in modern European settings and displacing concentrations beyond Europe's imagined borders, ethnicized populations are marked as unprecedented arrivals fundamentally disconnected from long-term traditions. Without further access to staff or archives, unfortunately denied upon request by the author, it is impossible to say whether this results from a simple lack of attention, a different interpretation of what society should look like, a survey of what their most enthusiastic fans ask for, a cynical assessment of the buying power of particular consumers, or some mixture of these and other factors.

What is clear is that these limiting representations are the product of what Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019, 4–12) calls an "imagination gap" that extends beyond Playmobil. Writing about fantastic adventure literature, Thomas tracks the erasure or caricature of the experiences of people of color. She argues these works are "racialized mirrors" that reflect back societal prejudices upon readers

and thus make it difficult for young people of color to see themselves as they understand themselves. To challenge the false universalisms that elide the operations of whiteness, she calls for a practice of “critical race counterstorytelling” that foregrounds the experiences and perspectives of the marginalized. More than the anodyne and limited diversity practices that Playmobil has pursued thus far, such a call insists on the need for producers and consumers to actively engage with the longstanding practices that have produced and sustained inequalities.

This call is particularly apt for toys because children use them to understand the world around them. More and broader studies on representation and their links to historical practices will provide a firm foundation for more studies on what children and other consumers actually do with these products. Existing research shows that we must be careful not to assign toys too much power. Children are creative creatures who undermine intended messages and often turn toys to unexpected ends in the pursuit of their own enjoyment and personal development. As Van Leeuwen (2009) has shown in his study of Playmobil, a child can transform a fireman into a baby, a wizard into a biker. But toys do have power: they can confirm or challenge existing visions of the world (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Jones and Rutland 2018). The task for this future research, as Van Leeuwen puts it, is to explore the varying degrees of affordance and constraint, how they open up and how they close down what children can see and imagine. Playmobil’s founding designer Hans Beck actually had this tension in mind when he envisioned a body of toys that provided the raw materials for children to engage with and reimagine the world around them. When Playmobil more critically challenges the white mythologies running through its offerings, the company will be closer to achieving Beck’s idealistic vision of toys that “set no limits on the imagination.”

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