Recoding Narratives: Inclusion and Diversity as a Path to Design Innovation

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to address the issue of diversity in the design world, exposing the need for revising our current paradigms. This study examines current events and data from the tech and creative industry that show a glaring lack of diversity in the field, and explains how this hinders creativity and innovation. This essay pairs theory and evidence to reveal that the best pathway to the future is the "recoding" of established design narratives through the celebration of a wider history with diverse role models and greater opportunity for non-normative design cultures.

Keywords: innovation, design, education, diversity

Dialogue

I don't think it's a secret that the tech community and industry has an issue with diversity. [1]
—Mark Zuckerberg

Augustus leans forward, trying to get closer to the screen. His hand clicks the mouse around, in control. From behind him, I see an image of a poster on his monitor. He senses my presence and leans back, then turns around and looks at me, waiting for an opinion. I had been walking by the workstations, delivering individual critiques as part of our project schedule. Today was a "work-day with instructor's review" and, in those situations, my role is to engage with the students facilitating their creative process by instigating a debate. Through this cooperative dialogue, we explore the most relevant points of the work, how they articulate and form a possible solution to the design problem. This critical thinking method is never easy—there is a level of subjectivity to the discussion and the experience can take visceral turns—but it is key to every creative process.

This was the beginning of my first semester at the University of Memphis. Yet, after four years teaching graphic design at South Alabama, I should have felt seasoned enough. So I pulled a chair next to Augustus and started looking at his work. He waits, patiently. "The composition looks busy", I thought. "Too many colors, typography looks distressed. Where are the negative spaces? I don't see a grid structure…" Augustus was still waiting but I have not yet uttered a word. "Maybe some Swiss style typography, some Crouwel, some Rand." Not a word, only a hard swallow.

My silence was the culmination of a growing uncertainty that was brooding inside of me: how can I mentor young designers and teach them to become innovators if my analysis is being skewed by a framework of cultural bias? How could I, a Latin American Brazilian, base my design critique on a narrative that was largely European and U.S. American? I realized that my design education in the United States had played a significant role in building on me a design consciousness that favored a hegemonic canon which, to be fair, I fully embraced. But the realities of space, and time, broke this process of dogmatic construction: my experience of seven years teaching in the U.S. South, a landscape often marked by a sense of otherness, gradually recoded my "nonresident alien[1]" identity from a flawed definition to a sound embrace of my Latino-Brazilian heritage. As my career in design education has brought me to Mexico, it has become clearer that creativity only benefits from cultural inclusion by allowing design to become a source of affirmation and exceptional inspiration. And this realization only happened through my constant dialogue with the students. Seeing their struggle with normative definitions forced me to question why design should comply with a preconceived formula instead of being a fluid system that reconfigures itself based on the context of each environment.

This article is a contribution to the current prolific discussion on the issue of diversity in the design field. It puts forward, through a combination of theory and selected evidence, the need for a more inclusive dialogue between the discipline and the socio-cultural structures it mediates. While standing on three basic elements of narrative—style, story, and characters—this research starts with the assumption that a design narrative is a strategy that can be re-written[2]. Our title takes a cue from Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory and proposes a "recoding"—or the reshaping of our way of thinking into more culturally inclusive design ecologies as the best way to answer the current issues of human experience.

Style

In the first chapter of *Change By Design,* Tim Brown exposes the common assumption about the superficiality of style. The founder of the design firm IDEO and one of the intellectual fathers of Design Thinking notes how fundamental it is to "get under" the superficial and not be distracted by this expression of form that has a single purpose of beautifying the object. Based on this perspective, style should not be defined as a goal set at the beginning of the design process, but a consequence of

[1] A nonresident alien is a classification assigned to a non-U.S. citizen, or foreign national, who doesn't pass the green card test or the substantial presence test.
[2] An assumption of narrative theory, which looks at stories as a way of explaining the human experience – how we make sense of stories and how stories help us to make sense of the world.

the process of investigating the subject matter through spaces of "ideation, iteration, and implementation." [2] Style relates to form, as meaning relates to content—or form to substance. Yet, this practical understanding of style as mere consequence, as surface, has clouded views to the role it plays as the materialization of the author's ideologies.

To better comprehend the meaning of style and how it relates to ideology, it is important to begin by differentiating it from aesthetics. Meredith Davis contends that style should not be confused with aesthetics, as something referring to the specific way form has been arranged. Aesthetics, Davis explains, is not concerned with the spheres of specificity—it is a field of philosophy that studies the fundamental nature of beauty and its representation. Therefore, aesthetics is interested in the broader, universal spectrum of human expression. Style, on the other hand, is what defines the singular relationship between the author and the artifact's composition. Davis also notes: "Style defines a particular kind of relationship between the function of something and how it looks. The material, sensory qualities of the artifact produce emotional responses and meaning that might not otherwise be evoked by the literal subject matter itself. Style is often an expression of ideology, form that arises from beliefs and theories, as much as from the subject matter of the work." [3] There is not a style that stands above, or proves to be more efficient, than others—they are all manifestations of human identity. And in order to explore the rich possibilities that it brings to design, and thus to innovation, one must look into the disruptive role that individual, particular, choices can have in open systems, as opposed to closed standardized norms. Within the vast system of meaning that conforms the design *langue*, style is the *parole*[3]. In the development of new products and services, if a diverse style philosophy is incorporated, design can speak many idioms and be more efficient in bringing new solutions to different issues. Style may flourish when the design of user experience is open to product personalization (through algorithmic intelligence that reads user data to deliver the right content) and user customization—digital products or services that allow for changes onto the experience in order to meet specific needs, such as layout and add-on configuration on web browsers. These inclusive open systems, although far from ideal and still guided by corporate interests, are demonstrations of how style can influence narrative—or of how technology can be used to address the user's diverse interests as a key usability issue.

As we pursue the styling of the narrative by understanding and giving space to our individual differences—be it in terms of ethnicity, race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation—design will expand its lexicon and find disruptive solutions that are not available in a culturally hegemonic system. It allows processes and solutions to "swim away" from the mainstream or, as Richard Buchanan explains, to move "away from the central thesis of an argument in order to consider alternative ideas and experiences (…) moving away from the assumptions and values regarding design that are implicit in one's own culture in order to consider design from the perspective of other cultures." [4] The inclusion of alternative forms of thinking should be considered by large corporate structures as well as smaller organizations who want to sustain their business models. Hence, the diversity of designers at work needs as much consideration as the diversity of the people for which the design is made. The Trickster Company[4] is an example of a studio that promotes a particular sense of otherness while it draws from visual representations of indigenous art from the U.S. Northwest Coast. Founded by Tlingit-Athabascan designers, their philosophy bridges innovation to tradition while it explores subjects of Native culture.

In the case of digital products, the adoption of models that pursue innovation by diversity are even more essential, since the product is almost entirely conceived (from ideation to prototyping and implementation) by a small team of designers and developers. As companies invest more in artificial intelligence and design for the automation of machine learning, and more perspectives are brought into the development process, more efficient and inclusive the automation will be (and with fewer unintended consequences). [5] By embracing different points of view in the design process, we will allow for better analysis in complex problem-solving scenarios. Diverse teams, classrooms, and networks are more capable of addressing local concerns with a wider perspective and view design solutions more critically by asking a better range of questions. This form of critical thinking that aggregates alternative persepectives provides a more efficient dialectic model—one that more accurately reflects our time while understanding the role of design in culture creation and thus its relevance to the politics of colonization.

Story

"Many designers who deserve to be in this book could not be included because of space limitations, and to these I extend my apologies. (…) Although we have become more of a global culture since research for a History of Graphic Design began over thirty years ago, many regions and countries were excluded for similar reasons." [6]

This excerpt is from the preface *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* (1983), by Philip B. Meggs and Alston W. Purvis. In what is arguably the most important book on the history of graphic design, Mr. Purvis assumes his *mea culpa* for the chosen narrative on the book, almost entirely grounded on the U.S. American and European design experiences and paradigms. Albeit an astounding work of research that has helped establish design as an important manifestation of human culture, the lack of a diverse global approach on the book's narrative is another evidence of the field's adherence to cultural hegemony. At the same time, it also grants an opportunity to discuss historical perspective and the fundamental role it plays on the formation of a new and inclusive design narrative. Our views of the past can shape our current ways of thinking. Hence, when publications and schools prioritize Eurocentric design histories, they are directly influencing the views, the ethics, and the behavior of designers everywhere.

[3] ***Langue*** (French for "language") and ***parole*** ("speaking") are linguistic terms introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure in his Course in General Linguistics. While *Langue* provides the structure and conventions of the signifying system, *parole* is the language choices one makes when using it.

[4] Visit site: https://trickstercompany.com/

It is important to note that today, and during the recent past, many organizations that have benefitted from these hegemonic discourses are pondering over design's diversity problem and are publicly discussing the issue. Organizations such as AIGA[5] recognize that the only sustainable way of thinking and doing design for the future is embracing inclusiveness. In a statement, AIGA points out that "there are two overlapping areas in which design as a profession is lagging: demographic diversity and a culture of inclusion. The two rely on each other, and both are crucial for the future success of the industry." [7] They continue by acknowledging that, even though diversity has become a common buzzword in their conferences and discussions on design education, only by acts such as hiring people from underrepresented groups, the community can make a real change.

The revision of design's history by opening it to truly global and non-normative perspectives has the power to put into new light the current context of the design culture, allowing us to be more critical and active with the potential to start a chain reaction in the form of a massive dialogue of call and response. Published by *Print Magazine* in 1987, "Black Designers: Missing in Action," by Cheryl D. Miller, was a landmark article which puts into perspective the segregated nature of the field. In the heels of its publication, AIGA, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts supported a daylong national event called "Why Is Graphic Design 93% White?" which ignited important discussions while shaping important new policies at the organizations involved. In January, 2017, AIGA's *Eye on Design* online publication, delves into the subject once again in the op-ed "Why Can't the U.S. Decolonize Its Design Education?" by Margaret Andersen. In the article, Andersen discusses how even though a lot of of awareness has been raised on the topic, it does not necessarily reflect an actual change is in design education programs. According to her, "While diversity and inclusion might be ubiquitous terms in the mission statement of any progressive university, these words alone do little to address the lack of diversity within the curriculum itself. [8]"

In face of this situation, the Andersen's article draws attention to important efforts being taken by designers and educators that are actually having an impact in their communities. Amongst those is Dori Tunstall, Dean at OCAD University[6] in Toronto, Canada. Tunstall shares OCAD's plan for a new educational paradigm, which she calls "respectful design", as a new curriculum that brings design studies closer to "questions of ethics, social justice, accountability, appropriation, indigenization, and decolonization." [9] This is a rare reflection of inclusion as policymaking. The Canadian government has made decolonization a directive in all educational institutions according to the principles laid out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Actions like this resonate in our current design industry and the chain reaction continues on AIGA's Diversity and Inclusion Initiative, which aims to "support a more diverse audience of design students, practitioners, managers, thinkers, enthusiasts, clients, consumers, and policy makers." [9] History is alive and continues to be changed by communities and networks that are willing to raise awareness and act on the issue, creating programs that bring about new ideas and gather resources into a far-reaching strategy that should consider underrepresented cultures as key players in the making of creative cultures.

Revised historical perspectives, updated educational curricula, and supportive government policies show practical ways for recoding the narrative towards inclusion. Yet, I argue that in order to ensure that the recoding process is comprehensive it should take place in all of Stuart Hall's four stages of communication: "production, circulation, distribution/ consumption, and reproduction. [8]" Again, the apparatus of the creative industry has a fundamental place in the process of change, not only by hiring diverse teams but also by implementing a philosophy of change with real economic consequences. One of the undeniable leaders of the market, Google, disclosed its diversity report as part of the Google Diversity[7] effort. It recognizes the importance of having an industry that represents its population of users, setting the example for future generations and ensuring that their product development takes into consideration the complexity of diverse global perspectives and experiences.

The Internet, with its ubiquitous mobile accessibility, has taken the role of the "television newscast" in Hall's theory. On the same token, events nowadays can only be decoded within the apparatus of digital media—they need to "pass under" the broadcasting of media channels and user sharing to be "subject to all complex formal rules by which language signifies. The event must become a story before it becomes a communicative event. [10]" It should be noted, however, that according to Hall's theory, the stages that form the circuit of communication are linked but distinctive—at each step the audience goes through a process of decoding, which will only fulfill its purpose if translated into social practices of inclusion. This "relative autonomy" stands as a challenge for effective recoding. On the other hand, it is a relief to note that there is space for a message to be understood against the grain, even if the discourse we are trying to articulate flips the system around and becomes part of the dominant structure. This way, there will always be a safe space for disruption, which is essential to innovation.

Characters

It is fitting then, that I should complete this analysis by describing three protagonists of recoded narratives. These are the heroes of a new journey that embraces diversity. Their role here should not be confused with celebrity reverence—they are not being praised by their fame but for what they do to improve our industry and our thoughts. As Joseph Campbell puts it, "The ultimate aim of the quest must be neither release nor ecstasy for oneself, but the wisdom and the power to serve others. [11]" And through their applied knowledge and experiences, they are reshaping the environment of design, technology, and research.

Satya Nadella

[5] American Institute of Graphic Arts
[6] http://www.ocadu.ca/
[7] https://www.google.com/diversity/

Born in Hyderabad, India, in 1967, he is the son of a civil servant and a professor of Sanskrit. After working for Sun Microsystems, he joined Microsoft in 1992 and was one of only thirty Indian immigrants working for the company. Nadella became the CEO of Microsoft in February 2014, in a critical moment when the company was losing steam. He has fostered a philosophy of collaboration and accessibility, making sure that the company's software and services are available whenever and wherever their users are. In less than two years, he has changed the profile of the company, even by doing the unthinkable: converting Apple fans to Windows. As he leads the company into a new era, Nadella stresses the importance diversity and inclusion have to Microsoft's mission to "empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more." He has said that inclusion "shows up in every meeting, starting with me," noting that "everyone is able to contribute their best because we all come with different styles, we have different cultural upbringings, what makes us tick is different. So you got to have leaders who are in-tuned with that." [12] These comments sharply contrast with the divisive, anti-immigrant rhetoric that recently took over the U.S. presidency.

Eddie Opara

A graphic designer born in Wandsworth, London in 1972, he studied at the London College of Printing and Yale University, where he received a Master of Fine Arts in 1997. Mr. Opara founded his own studio in 2005, The Map Office, and then a few years later he became a partner of one of the leading graphic design studios in the world, Pentagram (New York). A black man in a traditionally white space, Eddie Opara does not hide his disappointment with the fact that there are not many like him. In a *New York Times* article, Alice Rawsthorn describes Mr. Opara at the beginning of his career already acknowledging the hurdles faced by a man of color in order to succeed in the design world. In the piece, he recalls a late night of work with his friend Kojo Boateng. When another colleague asked why were they still there Boateng replied: 'It's because we're black. We have to work harder than you.' Opara then notes: "I don't know if it was true, but that was how we felt. [13]"

Joy Buolamwini

Founder of Code4Rights[8] and a graduate researcher at the MIT Media Lab, Joy leads the Algorithmic Justice League to fight bias in machine learning, while investigating new ways of learning that should develop technologies for social impact. Mrs. Buolamwini is a Rhodes Scholar, a Fulbright Fellow, an Astronaut Scholar, and a Google Anita Borg Scholar. Through her writings on inclusive coding—InCoding[9]—she exposes the need for computer language to become more inclusive, in an effort to "move closer to a world where technology reflects the diversity of its users and creators. [14]" She has uncovered the racial bias embedded in written code. In one of her writings, regarding the "coded gaze"[10], Buolamwini revealed how she, a black woman, had to handle the issues in algorithms for facial recognition by using a white mask, stating that it was the only way her face could be effectively detected by the machine. [15]

No narrative is complete without remarkable characters. These role models are the agents of every story—moving the plot forward, they set its course. As we follow the protagonists, we perceive their values as a system of characteristics that, when decoded, will offer a new set of learning lessons. Furthermore, they will form a range of new possibility models that should inspire emerging designers around the world.

Conclusion

The future of design innovation is dependable on how designers will be prepared to tackle increasingly complex problems. By challenging hegemonic design cultures and fostering more inclusive, non-normative perspectives, design can speak the language of our time. Once this language is heard, its diverse range of styles, stories, and characters will prompt new actions that will take part at different levels of society: from the individual to organized institutions, education systems, and government—the narrative will be recoded until it finally becomes a reality.

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[9] https://medium.com/@Joy.Buolamwini

[10] The term "coded gaze" is used by researcher Joy Buolamwini and refers to the problem of discrimination in code libraries used for facial recognition.