

FOCUS

Tools for Cultural Production: Archiving Voice, Culture, and Community

December 8, 2020
Omar Mohammad

This piece appears in the [Are.na Annual 2021](#), themed “tend.”

When I got my first job working as a designer at SFMOMA, I was proud to be doing work for the culture and communities of the Bay Area and West Coast at large. But I shortly realized that although the term “cultural institution” was heavily thrown around by the white leaders and directors of the museum, it quickly lost much of its weight. I left the museum after a year and a half, in October of 2019, to focus on my own work and to rethink what art and design in a cultural context truly meant outside the museum, cultural institutions, and academia. This triggered me to think critically about what it meant to be a cultural institution, about what culture had to do with art and design, and if the two should share any relationship at all.

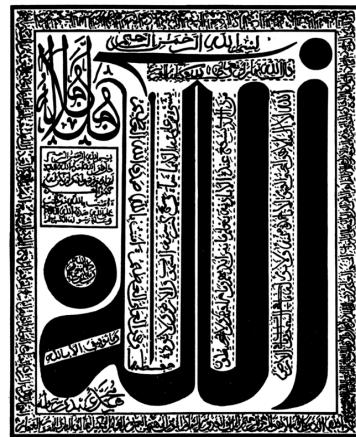
I began at my own cultural origins and thought about Islamic art and design from the past and the present. I dug through links, articles, images, and videos, and framed the research in this context: *Islamic Art & Design Culture within the fields of typography, architecture, and design that may not exist as direct representatives of Islamic Art & Design, but as derivatives of work from Islamic countries, cultures, and languages and of the designers and architects who's origins lay in those regions*. Through this research I discovered the great work of Nadine Chahine, a Lebanese type designer who's typefaces include *Frutiger Arabic*, *Neue Helvetica Arabic*, and *Univers Next Arabic*, the Arabic script counterparts to the classic European heavyweights. Her 2003 typeface *Koufiya* was the first to be simultaneously designed in both Latin and Arabic script, creating a bridge between both languages and visual cultures.

لنيوپاب لاین تیپفیت فی عن المدینة المنوریة، فی العاًم ١٩١١ ثبتت اول من اندیع الـ الصفـ
المـهـمـهـاـسـ فـيـ اـلـمـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ، فـیـ العـاـمـ ١٩٥٤ـ صـفـیـهـ اـلـمـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ، فـیـ مـعـالـیـةـ
الـلـكـلـاـكـ، وـقـدـ قـدـمـتـ لـلـمـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ مـنـ اـلـمـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ، فـیـ مـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ،
کـمـ اـنـ اـنـدـاـلـ جـاـعـهـ اـلـمـصـمـمـیـنـ فـیـ اـلـمـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ، فـیـ مـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ، فـیـ مـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ،
کـمـ اـنـ اـنـدـاـلـ جـاـعـهـ اـلـمـصـمـمـیـنـ فـیـ اـلـمـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ، فـیـ مـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ، فـیـ مـدـنـیـةـ الـمـنـوـرـةـ،
لـنـیـوـپـاـبـ الـمـدـنـیـةـ عـلـیـ اـلـأـنـجـعـ الـمـطـوـطـ بـاـدـتـ وـالـقـدـیـمـ الـمـوـجـوـهـ الـوـرـوـهـ

Linotype's involvement with Arabic typeface design goes one century back. In 1911, Linotype was the first to produce machines for the mechanical typesetting of the Arabic script. Today, Linotype boasts a large number of high quality Arabic typefaces that have proven very popular across the Arab world. Together with leading figures in the industry, Linotype has expanded and updated its font collection according to the latest technology requirements and the growing publishing needs of the Arab world.

Nadine Chahine's 2003 typeface Koufiya.

It just so happened that Nadine was teaching an Introduction to Arabic Type Design course online, so I quickly signed up. Our first assignment was to search the Internet for the places where Arabic typography shows up in the world: the Qu'ran, posters, artworks, storefronts. When we all came to class with more or less the same visual research, a discussion around the challenge of discovery arose. As a new field, Arabic type is years behind Latin type when it comes to contemporary design archives for reference and research. Nadine told us that as a new generation of Arabic type designers, we have a responsibility to keep up the important work that she and many other designers began for the culture of all languages and countries that use the Arabic script. To be an Arabic type designer today is to be an innovator of this field.



Divine Name – Moroccan Style

With this in mind, I decided to start a channel titled [خط Arabic Script Type & Design](#) to archive all I gathered as research for class. On Are.na, “type design” channels exist in surplus, but they mostly focus on Latin script typefaces. As of this writing, my channel is the largest collection of Arabic script on Are.na, with blocks that range from typical graphic design images to random signs in the Middle East to ancient scriptures. As the channel has gained traction

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Black, Indigenous, and People of Color often have channels that are more specifically regarding the self, culture, and community. It's not that white people don't have nuanced ideas to share and archive, but that these nuanced ideas to share and archive barely exist for BIPOC; we have to create them ourselves.

Besides channels that relate to my own Afghan and Islamic culture, there's a wealth of channels on Are.na by BIPOC artists and designers that preserve and shape culture by means of archive and research. I spoke with three such designers—Shiraz Abdullahi Gallab, Florence Fu, and Darin Buzon—about creating, archiving, and researching tools for cultural production.

Salah table from Shiraz Gallab's channel "Salah Tables"

Shiraz Abdullahi Gallab

Please share a little about yourself and your practice.

I'm a designer, publisher, and educator. I was born in Khartoum, Sudan, and raised throughout the United States. My family moved around a few times during my childhood, so "home" has always been an evolving concept for me. If I had to pick a place, though, I'd say Chicago is my adult home. In my work, I tend to study language, form, and specificity. And while I work primarily in print, my process is heavily informed by publishing platforms on the Internet, too.

How is your practice informed by your cultural background?

I grew up in very white towns, including Provo, Utah, and Kent, Ohio, and throughout my childhood, I was trained to believe that my cultural background was subordinate to that of white America. For that reason, I prefer to locate my voice and prioritize my narrative in my practice. My limited proficiency in Arabic also informs my work, but in a more subtle way. I grew up in a household where Arabic was regularly spoken, but I've always had a distant

What was the moment like when you first realized your voice, culture, and community were not represented in the majority of contemporary design discourse?

I entered the design discipline with an interest in Black studies and cross-cultural exchange, and I wanted my background to be immediately apparent in my work. I never really wavered on this in grad school, but I was pretty frustrated with what I was seeing in design books and historical references. I had always noticed a disconnect between my design training and my cultural background, and it felt like I had to sacrifice my point of view in order to “make it” in the industry or something.

In your research and work on these topics, how do you find the materials you need to progress?

These days, I rely mostly on Are.na and digital archives. I like to reference architecture, textiles, and holy texts from East Africa and the Middle East. I also enjoy looking at more ordinary materials, like flyers that are posted on Facebook to American Muslim communities. I honestly think our Muslim aunts and uncles are better designers than me.

What is your channel that you would like to share called? What is it about?

Salah Tables: this channel features prayer time tables that are regularly circulated online and in-person. Salah is the second pillar of Islam, and it calls on Muslims to pray five times a day at prescribed times (e.g. sunset). I grew up seeing these tables all the time, and I love that they are so data-heavy and expressive at the same time.

What is lacking in the history, research, and knowledge of your subject matter?

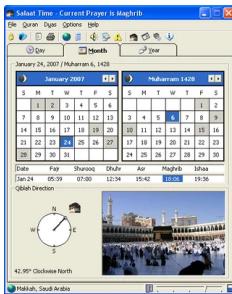
There isn't much research on how contemporary Islamic practice is visually depicted in Western countries. I think there is a fascinating visual culture coming out of American Islam, but I don't know if it's ever been studied and highlighted in one centralized location.

How does your channel act as a tool for cultural production?

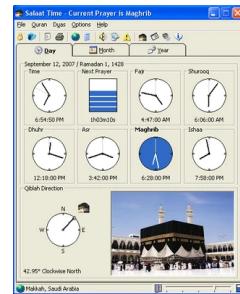
Beginning in the 9th century, Muslims made a lot of important advances in mathematics and astronomy. The salah tables that I've collected aren't directly related to all of that, but in a way, they seem to reinforce and celebrate our interest in time, space, and numbers. The math behind our religious practice is pretty powerful, because it is made so accessible to anyone who chooses to participate.

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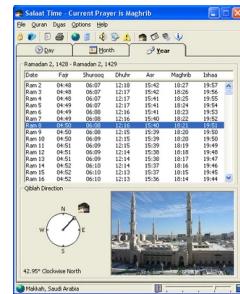
Are.na / Shiraz Abdullahi Gallab / Salah tables



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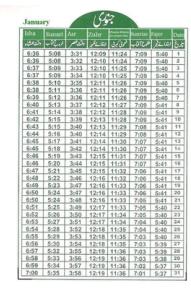
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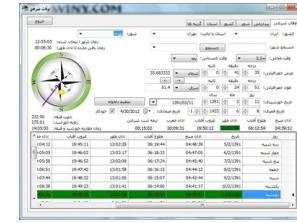
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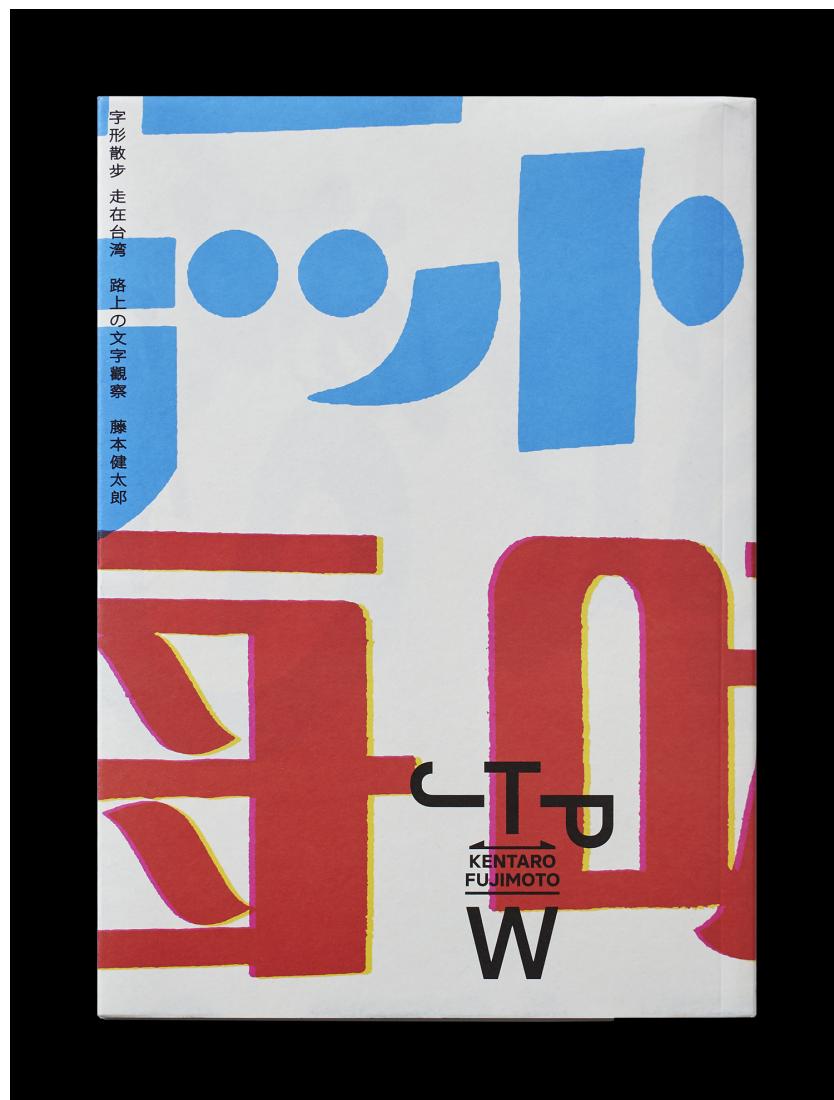
Florence Fu

Please share a little about yourself and your practice.

I am a writer, researcher, and occasional type designer based in New York. I write to make design history accessible, and to offer ways of understanding and looking at designers and their works, especially those who are not covered in the Western world. My research interests revolve around the impact of modernism, colonialism, imperialism, and globalization on graphic design, typography, and visual culture in East Asia since the 20th century. My curiosities have been focused on Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea. That's a huge topic, but I'm still exploring the field and taking my time to absorb all that's out there.

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Asian cultures. I feel like I occupy this in-between space in terms of how I position my research, too. I envision myself as a bridge between East and West, trying to expand East Asian design history at large, and fill in the gaps that are lacking for audiences in the West. When researching East Asian graphic design, I feel an indescribable closeness. Even though I didn't grow up and live in Taiwan, the language is close to me, the aesthetic is familiar to me, and these visual ephemera are media to connect me to my parents and ancestors. I think about the posters and packaging that were part of my parents' daily life in Taipei, or the multilingual newspaper ads my grandparents encountered when Taiwan was still a Japanese colony.



Wang Zhi-Hong for Faces Publications, 2019

My interest in East Asian design history grew while working at Letterform Archive in San Francisco. The collection is massive and awe-inspiring, but like many other collections, it is still very Western-centric. The collection of Asian works is comparably slim, and it made me eager to know what else is out there and what is missing from the shelves.

I believe making a collection more diverse is a life-long commitment. To go beyond histories that are familiar, and to put in the energy to learn new ones takes time.

As the collection grows, my own mission as a contributor is to continue writing about work from East Asia — both for visitors to know they can ask to see Hangul type specimens or 20th century Japanese lettering, and for the general public to learn more about East Asian design.

In your research and work on these topics, how do you find the materials you need to progress?

One of the hardest parts about being an independent researcher is not having access to academic libraries. It's wild to me that a lot of the literature I've been able to read is because I had a friend who graduated a year after me and would let me politely bug her for PDFs.

When working in other languages, like Japanese or Chinese, I ask for support from friends and family who are native speakers. It blows my mind that there are things that I can only find on Google if I search in the native language, whereas romanization may lead to a dead end. As a Westerner researching East Asia, my process will always be collaborative and be in conversation with those communities I'm researching. Their time, patience, and energy have been major factors to my progression.

What is the channel that you would like to share called? What is it about?

台灣設計 - Design in Taiwan documents works by contemporary designers in Taiwan, as well as organizations that are promoting design. One of the biggest names representing Taiwanese graphic design is Wang Zhi-Hong, for his typographic book designs that blend Eastern and Western aesthetics to create a style that is identifiably his own. At the same, I seek to document other contemporary designers and studios who are doing interesting work and have stakes in curating, publishing, and teaching. I document these other organizations like research institutions, galleries, and libraries, etc. since they very much have a hand in shaping and investing in design literacy and discourse in the country. Taiwan is a tiny island, and I feel like not many people even know about the country. I hope that those who come across this channel feel curious or inspired, and go down their own rabbit holes.

What is lacking in the history, research, and knowledge of your subject matter?

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Inspire designers all over the world. I feel like in the last few decades till today, researchers are just getting started. First, there are so many works that haven't been digitized yet, whereas you can Google so many Western designers and have a wealth of images to see and learn from. This is a major roadblock to someone researching visual culture—if I'm working from the States, I can't physically go to special collections libraries in Taiwan or Hong Kong. There are major gaps in translated primary and secondary sources as well. There are researchers out there who have begun to do the work, but this entire process understandably requires a lot of time.

Are.na / florence fu / 台灣設計 - Design in Taiwan

[Made in Taiwan: Curated ...](#)

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I am a designer, programmer, and writer whose work intersects at the letter. I work with letters because that's where I always come back to, and where everything is born from. By centering my individual practice onto that particular, discrete unit of meaning, all other related disciplines that I incorporate into my body of work acquire a purposeful origin.

How is your practice informed by your cultural background?

I am an Indonesian-Filipino person born in Southern California into a homogeneous Indonesian Protestant community, which was my first experience of othering. As I aged, I grew to learn that there isn't a single place on this earth where I can confidently say I can't be othered. As a non-religious, Indonesian-Filipino, ethnically Batak designer, I'm not like my homogeneously ethnic Indonesian faith-driven peers aspiring to be nurses. I am not of the more visible in the American Empire or in Asian America, and I am not even of the 87.2% Muslim-populated Indonesia whose primary ethnic group are of the Javanese people.

This background has influenced me to navigate this world by actively seeking ways in which marginalized individuals and their respective ontologies can be uplifted, amplified, and simply given a fair chance. I seek and produce work that's purposeful to that mission. When I work with the letter, it becomes the fundamental building block for narrative, for a reality in which equitable opportunity and human dignity is deserved for us all.

What was the moment like when you first realized your voice, culture, and community were not represented in the majority of contemporary design discourse?

While I think my upbringing conditioned me to think the wrong way, it was at university where I realized I was marginalized. All the teachings I was taught, all the interactions I had, were experiences that rarely, if at all, accommodated to my personal experience. Not to say that the world revolves around me, but instead that more than not I had to bend to the will of something else.

In your research and work on these topics, how do you find the materials you need to progress?

I can't say I am a researcher of any regard, but my individual practice is an ever-evolving one that grows through new learnings as I continue to navigate this earth. My practice is best described as walking through a garden of ideas and knowledge, in which I handpick what I find good in order to hopefully prepare something exciting from the ingredients I've gathered. In other words, my practice is a continuous navigation through conceived, documented,

There's no real method to how I find these materials. I often just allow my Internet feeds to give me content that I find interesting. If it arrests me, I then will seriously engage with it through a research tool called Roam Research. My knowledge base currently is essentially an evolving Wikipedia for my own purposes.

What is the channel that you would like to share called? What is it about?

Design Thinking is a Rebrand for White Supremacy: It is the ever-evolving suggested readings and bibliography of an essay I wrote critiquing design in the current dystopic tech landscape.



Billboard by Jonathan Barnbrook, Las Vegas

What is lacking in the history, research, and knowledge of your subject matter?

As stated in my essay, since product design has found itself so fundamentally embedded in institutions of capitalism, using lenses that are outside capitalism's domain seems nearly useless. There is no vocabulary or shared understanding for that. Ideas of social welfare, uplifting the marginalized, or concern for the health of the planet are either marketing gimmicks or used as sheep's clothing for the wolves of capitalistic institutions.

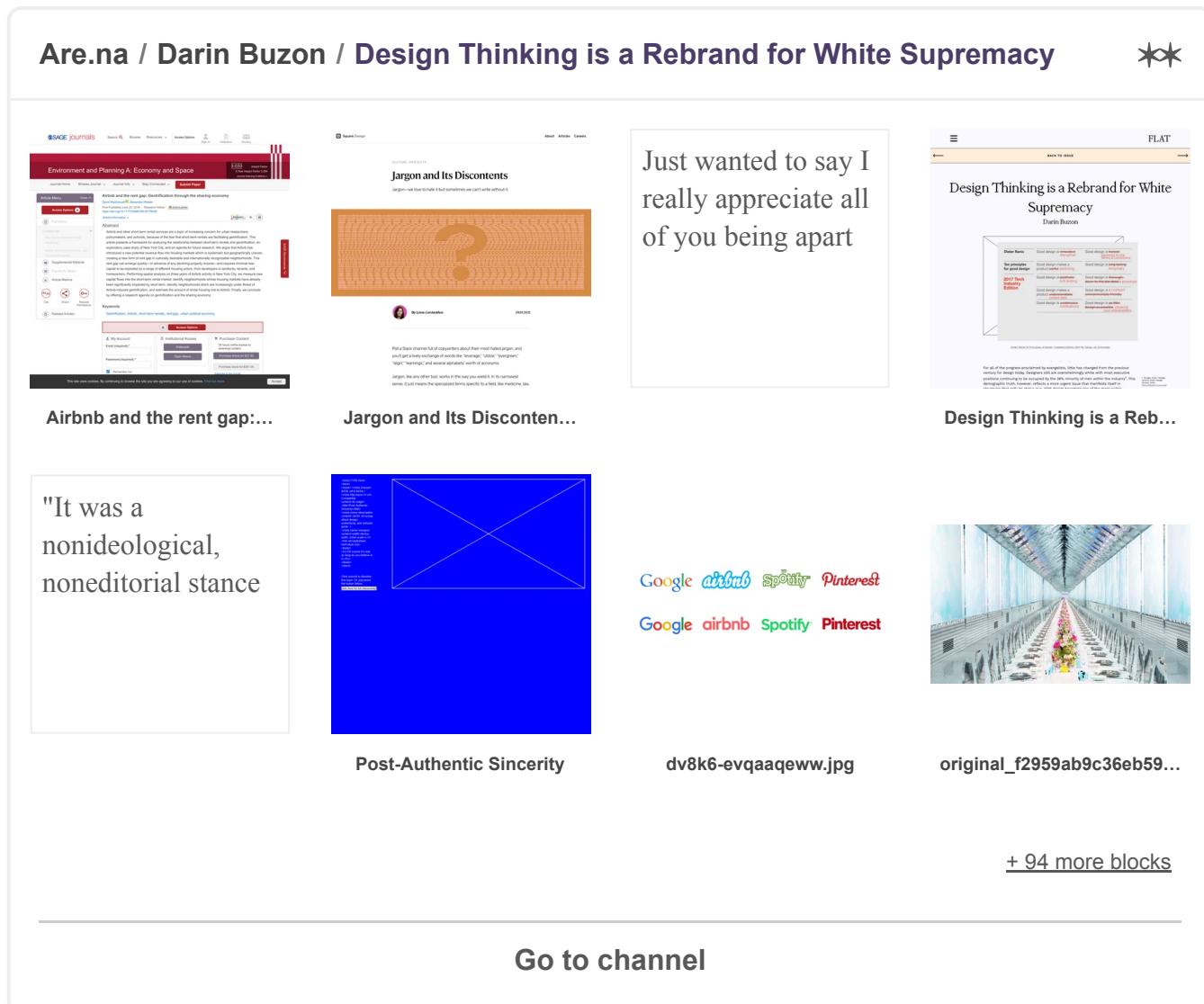
What is lacking in the subject matter of product design is not something inherent, but rather something that involves the current discourse, which informs and shapes its surface-level understanding. Simply put, product design lacks significant narratives that genuinely center the human, earth, and earth's bounty in its practice. And if that's not its first center of focus, we can't even begin to scratch the surface of the nuances of racism, imperialism, and marginalization that intricately root itself in the unsustainable system of capitalism.

How does your channel act as a tool for cultural production?

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ratner can be thought of as the shears that prune what is good to become even better. Since it is more of a tool used to critique, it ensures that the cultures we create going forward are not ones that harm, implicitly or explicitly.

Are.na / Darin Buzon / Design Thinking is a Rebrand for White Supremacy



The dashboard displays a network of nodes, each representing a post or topic. Nodes include "Airbnb and the rent gap: Generationalism through the sharing economy", "Jargon and Its Discontents", and "Design Thinking is a Rebrand for White Supremacy". The network shows various connections between these posts and other users or content.

Airbnb and the rent gap: Generationalism through the sharing economy

Jargon and Its Discontents

Design Thinking is a Rebrand for White Supremacy

"It was a nonideological, noneditorial stance

Post-Authentic Sincerity

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Omar Mohammad

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software for the web. He studied design and some cs/ee at UC Davis, then went on to be a creative technologist intern → designer in the Web + Digital Dept. and Design Studio at SFMOMA. Since then he has collaborated with Letterform Archive, Shared Studios, and Oakland Public Library. He continues to work on collaborations and personal projects in Berkeley, CA.

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