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Kristen Coogan_Reimagining Graphic Design History

Position Paper

Reimagining an Antiracist Graphic Design History: A Model for a Plural Pedagogy

Abstract

This article calls for a reexamination of graphic design history and pedagogy as a form of antiracist action in response to the events of 2020.

The horrific deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd gripped America, drawing widespread outrage throughout 2020 amid a pandemic. It was an all too familiar tale of police brutality against Black Americans that incited national furor and once again thrust antiracist discourse into mainstream consciousness. Set against the backdrop of a polarizing presidency that normalized an autocratic culture and enabled far right extremism, many Americans acknowledged a system that enabled unfair and unjust treatment of certain classes.

An antiracist consciousness urges us to actively fight against and reconsider systems that not only defy equality, but perpetuate inequality. As diversity, equity, and inclusive efforts transform America's institutional structures including workplaces and academia, educator's should draw on their innate desire for inquiry and acknowledge their position of influence. Educators reside at the cross-hairs of opportunity: we can enact change through revised narratives and the mechanism through which those narratives are delivered. Antiracist activist Ibram X. Kendi calls this narrative-change initiatives.

While the dominant elite notion of Western graphic design history faces criticism as a narrative needing less prejudice by US-based educators, practitioners, and university students alike, educators can recenter the commonly taught narrative of graphic design around voices that actually reflect the diversity in the classroom. This article outlines a method for incorporating plurality into design history education to cultivate inclusivity and reverse systematic prejudice.

For an Antiracist Graphic Design History

The time is now

A pandemic. Racial reckoning. Civil unrest. Political uprising. Critical Race Theory. For many Americans, the year 2020 motivated self-examination across multiple spectrums of consciousness — economic, intellectual, social, and cultural. As grade schools and the economy shutdown because of a worldwide pandemic, #MeToo and Black Lives Matters protests erupted in historical numbers, Critical Race Theory advocates challenged poltical and educational status quos, and the United States Capitol was stormed as the nation closed out the four term of a presidency peppered with xenophobic rhetoric, America's democratic integrity hit a wall.

In his bestselling book *How To Be An Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi critiques America's democratic posture suggesting that its institutions — education, politics, and law — promote racism and inequity (Kendi 2019). Kendi defines the concept of *antiracism* as a recalibration of institutional structures to balance access and opportunity. He notes the difference between *not racist* — denying racist tendencies, but accepting a system that yields inequity across races and classes — and *antiracist* — a world where individuals actively reshape policy and systems of justice (Kendi 2020). Kendi's text also reignited the concept of Critical Race Theory, the notion that racism is embedded into America's institutions in a way that perpetuates inequality. Critical Race Theory has become a lightning rod of controversy, polarizing supporters and deniers, especially as it relates to theoretical forms of racism in America's educational institutions. Nevertheless, acknowledging Critical Race Theory has value. Recognizing prejudicial structures in social situations and organizations is the first step toward improving equality (Delgado, Stefancic 2001).

The 2020 turmoil layered with a very public examination of race and inequality contributed to a heightened sense of activism in America. In his *Opinion* interview with Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ezra Klein outlines how we got here. Klein argues that Barack Obama's two term presidency defined by democratic idealism

actually polarized the country, fomenting an anti-democratic backlash that eased Donald Trump into the White House.[1] Trump's rhetoric nurtured racism, within America and at its borders, in criticisms of Baltimore, China, and Mexico, to name just a few. Klein, Hannah-Jones, and Coates all agree the Trump years reeked of autocracy. Rather than deferring to Trump's trademark bigotry, many Americans instead acted on a relentless desire for justice and equality (Klein 2021).

Kendi's work in academia and the launch of the 2017 Center for Antiracist Research, first at American University and now at Boston University, inspired action across educational institutions nationwide. Additionally, 2020 ushered in dialogue about reimagined academic cultures that could support diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces that no longer resembled a system enabling inequality. Buttressed by a desire for equality, educators acknowledged their ability to influence attitudes and beliefs. Educators realized how their content could feed into Kendi's definition of racism, and also how reorienting that same content could result in reform. As diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and Critical Race Theory entered the daily lexicon, pedagogy became a vehicle for action and reaction.

Introduction: Western Graphic Design History Under Attack

Graphic design is a discipline whose currency is communication and exchange. The medium has to continually reflect its technological, social, and political contexts to have impact. The discipline needs to be progressive and reside at the forefront of change to remain relevant. Despite all this, the accompanying Western telling of graphic design history stagnates. When Kendi urged institutions to reflect on their own racist tendencies, decades of thought across multiple accords were interrogated, and graphic design's historical roots came under fire. The graphic design history taught in the West is narrow and by Kendi's definition, racist: it is a tradition that exalts dominant Anglo-American and European, patriarchal traditions, and underrepresents all else. The

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[1] The rise of far right extremists groups persists and is increasing, driven chiefly by white-supremacist, anti-Muslim and anti-government conservatives.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2021/domestic-terrorism-data/

narrative crumbles under the weight of a diverse, equitable, and inclusive attitude; it needs revision. An antiracist canon would reflect an ever-diversifying population of educators, practitioners and university students. This article supports an actively antiracist graphic design history and proposes a pedagogy to better reflect the history's dynamic social and political contexts.

A narrative-change in graphic design history displaces White and Western exceptionalist narratives to make room for lesser known, multicultural stories. For this initiative to work, the delivery system — the pedagogy — must also change. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire outlines methods for disrupting the classroom hierarchy to correct the dominant-submissive classroom model. Instead of a direct instruction pedagogy singularly informed by one's own bias and lived experiences, expanding the teaching method to a project based approach allows a plurality where a greater number of minority discourses can be examined within the Western perspective. Such a plurality has the potential to disrupt the transcendent prejudice articulated in Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory insists that patterns of racism run deeper than individual biases and behaviors, and are instead systematically ingrained in our institutions, like education. The theory holds that institutions, like education, create *and* maintain biases that favor Whites, and marginalize non-Whites. Incorporating a plural pedagogy is the action needed to establish an antiracist design history.

Not only that, but students sitting in our classroom today are primed for action and expression. Born after 1996, Gen Z students, which now make up the majority of college students, came of age during the 2010s when tools for content creation and consumption became cheaper and more accessible, ushering in a thirst for information and a culture of exchange (Parker 2021). Smart phones, Wikipedia, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, along with other self-publishing ventures provide opportunities for expression and access. Expression yields politics. Access builds community. These realities help to draw users out of silent compliance and into dialogue, upending decades of a top-down notion of narration and make way for storytelling and exchange. Gen Z users can start movements with the click of a button

(Cohen 2020). “The political engagement of Gen Z, whether it is about climate change, racial justice or gender equality, is fast becoming a defining feature of the generation” (Hatzipanagos 2021). Gen Z’s sense of awareness is helping drive a push for more diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The History of History

The concept of historical bias is centuries old, making bias hard to identify and change difficult to enact.[2] Early Enlightenment historiographers like Voltaire argued for an empirical history informed by teleological evidence — but, Voltaire’s Eurocentric infused provinciality denied pre-civilized societies who lacked written records a position in his chronology. Descartes added that the conscious selection of data is arbitrary, partial and consequently, “a fatal interference” threatening to undermine rationality (Rosenthal 1955, 152). Over time, bias was codified by an oppressive, dominant class, fueling a compliance toward the canon. This pattern commonly transcends historical narratives, where White men arbitrated the stories being told, as the subordinate outliers were cast to the periphery. For centuries, audiences accepted the role of the historian as curator and translator, even if it resulted in cultural exceptionalism. Not only did White Europeans define parameters for curating history, they then inserted themselves squarely into that history, and marginalized people whose thoughts were deemed inferior.

In the 1970s Michel Foucault argued for revision in *Archaeology of Knowledge*. To reconcile historic bias, Foucault posited that the simple act of seeing could inform a culturally specific visual logic and system for archiving (Foucault 1972). He structured methods for criticism and analyzed how cultural value was historically formed and archived. Doing so helped move the practice of recording history beyond European exceptionalism, yet bias remained implacable.

[2] Merriam Webster defines bias as a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment, a prejudice. In this context, bias refers to a singular, dominant view that overpowers competing narratives.

This same age-old bias pervades graphic design history, too. One hundred years ago, the study of graphic design history emerged as an off-shoot to the practice and was codified by the industry with European trade books and periodicals.[3] The economics fueling the discipline relegated graphic design to either commercial audiences defined by and for privileged classes or as a beacon for mobilization, whether political, existential or otherwise. Steven Heller notes that graphic design transcended pedagogy when 'art museum curators collected graphic design ephemera, artifacts and papers' and 'when history books became accessible through classes, symposia and conferences (Heller 2020).' The 1980s saw a groundswell of historical and theoretical inquiry driven by the emergence and proliferation of MFA Graphic Design programs in the United States; a tradition of graphic design scholarship firmly situated itself within the academy. The subject of graphic design encompassed both the profession and a study of its history since Industrialization. American Philip Meggs expanded that timeline when he released *A History of Graphic Design* in 1983, documenting the presence of visual communication dating back to ancient Egypt. Trade magazines including London's *Eye* and California's *Emigre* were decisive counterpoints complementing Meggs's preeminent narrative. Nonetheless, each of these nodes on the timeline were shaped by dominant voices that reflected a patriarchal elitism.

A Seat at the Table for Non-Dominant Cultures

The community's demands on the historical gaze are shifting away from a Euro-dominated story favored by Voltaire to a more inclusive 21st century model to eradicate visible, systemic prejudice. Historically, minority communities and discourses including feminist, non-dominant cultures, and ethnic minorities didn't fit neatly into an aesthetic or cultural pedigree. This posture meant minority communities complied with colonial, and by extension, capitalist conditions. The result was a design culture that undermined native expression in favor of dominant classes. The system overlooked the underdog.

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[3] Editorials noted here include Jan Tschichold's *Die Neue Typographie*, Alfred Tolmer's *Mise en Page*, *Neue Grafik*, *Arts et Métier Graphique*, *Gebrauchsgraphik*, *Typographische Mitteilungen* and more.

In AIGA's *Eye on Design*, Laura Bolt acknowledges systematic sexism and the claustrophobic legacy of the patriarchy, noting "...the history of design has been written by both women and men, but there have been times when it was difficult to see where women have had a seat at the table, and just how significant their contributions have been (Bolt 2020)." That same neglect observed in the profession extends to the historic landscape. Cheryl Buckley adds that while "women had interacted with design in numerous ways...they largely had been ignored; when women's involvement with design was acknowledged, it was within the context of patriarchy (Buckley 2020, 21)." Attempting to combat the weight of the patriarchy, Buckley exposes ways women had been overshadowed by their 'feminine,' 'natural,' 'decorative,' 'instinctive,' identities, despite vast intellectual and aesthetic potential.

The same imbalance overshadows pedagogy too, as Mark Garavan's notes in his 2010 review of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "...oppressed groups are obliged to translate their concerns into other languages, especially the language of economics and business (Garavan 2010)." Garavan cites the systematic indifference toward minority perspectives and the resulting inequality of teaching approaches, where economics fuel an allegiance toward the dominant class. Garavan's weird line around pedagogy challenges educators to ask both *whether or not* and *how* bias can be neutralized in the classroom.

<u>Reimagining Design History Pedagogy</u>

Recognizing the universal need to rewrite the design history narrative recently triggered multiple efforts resulting in varying forms of expansion. Projects such as Jerome Harris's *As Not For, Dethroning the Absolutes* (Jerome Harris 2018), Polymode's *BIPOC Design History* (Polymode 2021) and Bahia Shehab's *A History of Arab Graphic Design* (Shehab and Nawar 2020) provide important alternatives, albeit from the singular lens of the historian. Each revision broadens the canon by tracing lesser known Black, BIPOC and Middle Eastern narratives, respectively. Alternatively, *The People's Graphic Design Archive* (Sandhaus and Levit 2020) provides a plural framework for graphic design history, where users dictate the archive's content. This plurality has the potential

to be more reflective of a global student audience that is increasingly diverse, representing minority cultures whose perspectives could complement and improve the canon's reach.

While questioning assumptions is vital to the work of educators, artists, and designers, decolonizing graphic design history requires more than challenging the patriarchal, elite, Eurocentric narratives of art and design. bell hooks cautions against "replacing one dictatorship of knowing with another" as educators seek new methods to teach student audiences seeking greater diversity and inclusion (hooks 1994, 32).[4] To decenter the West, and embrace multiculturalism, hooks suggests reconsidering classroom hierarchy, urging educators to focus on voice — who speaks, who listens. Freire outlines how students can act as facilitators, searching for their own individual perspectives or backgrounds reflected in the content as a way to liberate their outlook from canonical tradition (Freire 2005, 65). Educators have access to rich and diverse content, audiences, and opinion platforms, giving them agency to establish methods for inclusion that yield more universal truths than traditional teaching methods allow. Shifting this perspective enables educators to build on core aspects of a graphic design history while also embracing more variation in process and outcomes.

Modelling an Inclusive Process

A plural versus a singular style of inquiry informed this narrative-change initiative launched during my Graphic Design History seminar at Boston University during Fall 2020. Collective perspectives shaped the design history narrative which newly saw examples from Black, Latine, Eastern, female, and LGBQTIA+ legacies.

community

The process began with building a sense of connectedness and community among a group of seventy students. Community yielded comfort, safety, and ultimately, engaged inquiry. hooks asserts, "the professor must genuinely value everyone's

[4] As a writer, bell hooks chose the pseudonym bell hooks in tribute to her mother and great-grandmother. She decided not to capitalize her new name to place focus on her work rather than her name, on her ideas rather than her personality

presence...everyone influences the classroom dynamic...everyone contributes; these contributions are resources (hooks 1994, 8).” To create community, the class was organized into smaller discussion groups comprising six to eight students for the duration of the semester. To encourage intimacy, trust, and dialogue, weekly meetings focused on allying attitudes that challenged traditional design history narratives.

lectures

My lectures laid a foundation for analysis. With that, students were asked to introduce unique points of view shaped by individualized cultural backgrounds and lived experiences that mapped to lecture content. To help structure this thought process, students considered:

- Are there visual or conceptual parallels between lecture content and my own cultural and visual history?
- What role does context play in the rise of cultural equivalents?
- Is this stylistic and conceptual unity a basis for inclusion in the canon?

Supplementary readings and writing responses additionally helped students articulate individual points of view.

discussion

Armed with lecture content, supplementary reading and writing, students organized into small discussion groups for inquiry based reflection. Each week, discussions were framed by ‘critical questions’ intended to challenge existing narratives and encourage looking beyond familiar, ‘canonical’ graphic design references. Students allying with a particular ethnic, gender, or political identity were encouraged to connect their own interests or experiences to the dominant discourse as a vehicle for plurality. Going off-script during discussion was tolerated; perspectives that may have seemed beyond the scope of design history revealed personal aesthetic biases and interests.[5] Students were consistently encouraged to acknowledge and identify the larger social, political,

[5] In one example, a student who met Katy Perry delved into Katy Perry’s Los Angeles real estate woes, which led her to Los Angeles’s Sisters of the Immaculate Heart Convent and ultimately Corita Kent’s devout pop art of the 1960s. Experiences outside of class often informed intellectual and spiritual growth.

and economic context informing stylistic and aesthetic evolution. This plural engagement helped open up the discourse to artists, designers, and writers who represent communities and aesthetics that were historically excluded, revealing visual culture underdogs who created influential, context specific work.

Finding Calm Amid Chaos

Inviting more plurality to the classroom challenges elitist orthodoxy. But, the egalitarian nature of these experiences makes quality hard to identify. So, how does one avoid devolving into cultural relativism? Educators can model Foucault's theories of defining historical relevance to vet new ideas. Foucault lobbied for a culturally specific system to identify quality. These culturally specific codes manifest as design context: in what social, political, economic, or technological system did a design emerge? When an educator illuminates this context and articulates the evolution of design, indicating its path from conceptual origin to pragmatic artifact, cultural reception and commercial mainstream — students develop a curatorial discipline and the criticality needed to identify 'good design'. This pattern of thought provides students with a structured method for assessing and expanding, for finding relevance in an otherwise visual free-for-all.

Case Study — A Plural Design History Discourse in Action

With this structure in place, students dove into their own visual and lived histories as a source for supplementing the canon, while gaining the language to decode its stylistic genealogy and influence. After just one semester, this experiment yielded rich new alternatives, disrupted the canonical hierarchy and exposed 'low vernacular' visual styles that are realizing renewed seriousness. The expanded content also empowered students to represent more wide-spread cultural truths.

In this example, a student based in Lima, Peru mapped the evolution of a Victorian era design in urban, industrialized 19th century America to street art found in the Peruvian capital today. Students first learned about industrialization and the separation of design as an isolated planning activity that spawned a multitude of aftershocks to America's

19th century visual landscape. Victorian eclecticism permeated furniture, consumer products, fashion, and even typography. Style emerged as a symbolic idea, denoting class and worth with every extraneous flourish. Form signified status. The Victorian broadside offered another application for extravagant ornamentation, expressed through motley compositions of Egyptian, serif, and sans serif typography. Fast forward one hundred years, and the trend persisted throughout Los Angeles with the Colby Poster tradition (dec. 2012). Adding fluorescent ink colors to the familiar typographic bric-a-brac seen in 19th street art, Colby Posters displayed a "lowbrow approach result[ing] in a minimal, bold, and no-nonsense aesthetic that was always eye-catching and surprising" (Dunne 2014). The Peruvian student contextualized this work with posters she encountered daily. Peruvian Chicha street graphics snub elite aesthetic credo, acting as vehicles for anti-establishment, anti-colonial expression. The anti-purist posters incorporate Andean-influenced fluorescent colors, performative typography and idiosyncratic iconography, evoking a positive expression of diversity, medley, and democracy (Neira 2016). The more is more mentality transcends generations, classes and technology, and is indiscriminate towards its audience, amplifying its inclusive appeal. These relics of lowly street culture dovetail their noble origins, blur the lines between elite and vernacular design and ultimately enhance and broaden the Western narrative. In that moment, it never felt more important to open up the design history narrative to global vernaculars. The pandemic transformed my classroom into a truly global space. Peppering the discourse with dashes of local culture allowed students thousands of miles away to feel connected with their learning community.

In a second example, Chinese students supplemented the 1920s Russian avant garde canon with surprising new content. The radical and visually striking Communist propaganda graphics headlines every 20th century design history text as an important side-story newly emerges. Russian Constructivism branded the Communist regime. Like the Peruvian Chicha artists, the Soviet Union similarly addressed a universal audience, codifying a Communist aesthetic expressed with bold red and black geometric abstractions designed to cross classes, dialects, and geographies. Every black square, red wedge and pictorial typography stimulated institutional loyalty —

messages were meant to be seen, heard, and revered. Dynamically composed forms conjured a vision of the new world, “constructed” through a new visual architecture (Coogan 2020).

Students from China introduced the lesser known Big Character Posters (Dazibao), which carried a similar aesthetic and political gravity.[6] Like Communist Propaganda, the posters fervently entrenched a new political ideal, fortifying China’s 1960s Cultural Revolution led by Mao Zedong. Featuring bold black and red palettes and agitated typography hearkening to Constructivist visual language, the Big Character Posters established a forum for discussion and dissemination, but were ultimately weaponized against their own grass-roots audiences (Ho 2017). “Big-character posters were..ubiquitous, used for everything from sophisticated debate to satirical entertainment to rabid denunciation; being attacked in a big-character poster was enough to end one's career.” (“Dazibao”, n.d.) The generations surviving the Cultural Revolution reacted to political pressure and suppressed their own appalling first hand experiences, inadvertently obscuring the Dazibao culture in its entirety. A 2017 Harvard University exhibition featuring Dazibao posters presented over fifty works donated anonymously. Chinese historians involved in the curation acknowledged their own abbreviated awareness stemming from a lack of information — a culture of secrecy prolonged by relatives and educators who were likely pawns pressured by the regime to incriminate or abuse their own community (Bergeron 2017). Expanding the design history discourse simultaneously unearths, activates and repairs, allowing audiences to collectively process a past etched in trauma. My students felt honored and acknowledged when elements from their own histories entered into our discourse.

Plurality Beyond the Classroom

Plural narratives extend well-beyond the university classroom, where acclaim precedes relevance. History is subjective, relying on how critical information is processed, interpreted and circulated. The narrative-change initiative described here outlines how a

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[6] Trump xenophobia toward China throughout 2020 had a transcendent impact globally, and on local levels too. My Chinese students felt judged and castigated by our regime. To mitigate politically fueled racism, I encouraged connection, openness, empathy and participation.

responsive historical narrative — where content derives from multiple sources, is filtered and then cast into a historical mold — equips design history educators with an expanded storytelling capacity. The role of history educators shifts from presenting a dominant narrative to facilitating a plural discourse built on a disciplined and methodical curation that yields the desired representation. Kurosawa's well-known film *Rashomon* (1950) reflects the power of this plurality by representing individual voices and how an intellectual and emotional framework shapes perspective (Tanaka 2019, 106). Kurosawa disrupted the familiar structure of film when he incorporated multiple voices to recast a singular narrative. The film underscores how varied experiences aggregate to form a richly layered whole. Plurality has the potential to provoke deep understanding through empathy and awakening as individual perspectives uncover unique points of view.

Conclusion: Plurality and Antiracist Pedagogy

Narrative-changing graphic design history is timely and important. Antiracist pedagogy insists on reforming existing structures that historically and systematically enabled inequality and exclusion. Reimagined learning cultures should both represent increasingly diverse student populations through content and structure, and also model antiracist action for the students themselves.

Adopting a more inclusive, egalitarian method for studying and styling graphic design history helps educators mitigate their own bias by acknowledging the populations who have been or still are marginalized by current modules. Reorienting the classroom — shifting away from authoritative delivery methods to a plural discourse — teaches students the value of plurality and of their own unique contributions, a curatorial discipline and instills a curiosity and embrace of change.

The process outlined here legitimizes a plural approach, while the examples uniformly oppose absolutist traditions that routinely glorified idols. Student-generated content opens new possibilities “that are increasingly inclusive, representative and varied”. (Rittner 2020) Democratizing methods for establishing design history narratives

validates visual cultures that were historically excluded and provides space for student audiences to incorporate their own important cultural legacies — like the Peruvian Chicha and Chinese Big Character posters. Pluralism encourages open-mindedness, creative reflection and discipline. It also encourages agency. It teaches students to have a broader view of what the canon even is or includes, which also helps combat the bias and white male gaze over time to be more inclusive with each graduating class entering the workforce or future academic careers.

As design educators and students, we owe a debt to visual culture, to reflect on and contextualize disparate historical narratives. As student audiences grow more mediated, more global, more diverse, and more politically active, their educational experiences need to encompass the full historical landscape and embrace a messier, more inclusive terrain informed by plural learning. Liberate idiosyncrasies, embrace authenticity, and activate student's agency — they are integral to the narrative. Educators run the risk of complicating design history, but a narrative-change initiative endows the future discourse with an inclusivity that society is demanding and both students and the discipline deserves.

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Furthermore, does connecting the past to the present reactivate a history that feels dead as time, distance and perspective cloud its relevance.
Students can reinvigorate overly familiar and static canonical examples with fresh