

Summary
Master's Thesis

Is Designing with the Same Colors,
Yielding the Same Old Design?

Investigating The Perspectives Of Black Graphic Designers
In A Search for New Canons

Shani Milele Sandy

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1. Supervising Tutor: Prof. Dr. Shamus Khan

2. Supervising Tutor: Prof. Dr. David Slocum

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Summary

This research evaluates perspectives on creative measures in the Graphic Design field through the lens of underrepresented Black designers in the United States. It examines these viewpoints in the context of current design canons, which are founded on a popularized and normalized canon rooted in the Swiss design tradition and largely the domain of male designers of European descent. The data sources for this qualitative interview study were 23 Graphic Designers in practice for at least 5 years, residing in the United States and 25 - 45 years old. Eighteen of twenty-three interviewees were Black and five were White.

Introduction

The swatches that *represent* the racial identity and composition of the Graphic Design field are overwhelmingly homogenous. In a discipline that relies heavily on the diversity of ideas and perspectives to craft creative solutions, the lack of racial diversity—specifically among people of African, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American descent—is strikingly incongruous and apparent, especially when juxtaposed to demographics, and cause for examination. Consider New York City where 67% of the population is non-White, yet only 29% of those employed in creative occupations are non-White (Forman 47).¹ And certainly, an even fewer number of non-White creative professionals are in senior positions. While this statistic covers a broader swath of the creative professions beyond Graphic Design and focuses on New York City, one of the major design capitals, it is a clear indicator and example of the issue.² How can it be that one of the most racially diverse and design-centric cities in the United States has such an absence of diverse representation in its creative workforce? In my research, I specifically investigate this absence of “color” in the Graphic Design field and explore how it impacts the creative process, standards, and advancement of the field. My approach is to provide representation and consideration to the perspectives of those that are underrepresented as a means of examining what not incorporating their voices means for the field.

¹ Forman, Adam. *Creative New York*. Center for an Urban Future, 2015.

² The states with the highest employment level of Graphic Designers are California (28,940) and New York (20,510); the highest concentration of employment is based in the metropolitan and surrounding areas of Los Angeles and New York City from Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor. Occupational Employment Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2015. <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes271024.htm>.

Problem Statement

Uncovering the actual racial composition of the Graphic Design profession is quite challenging and requires further, but on the basis of observation, graduation rate, conference attendees, and *represented* industry leaders, it becomes clear that the racial diversity in the field is a paltry figure. In 2015, a mere 6% of United States graduates in design fields were African-American, and only 10% were Hispanic.³ Furthermore, as these groups enter careers “the statistics become even grimmer, with a representation of two percent and four percent respectively.”⁴ No data was presented on Native American designers. Also, while not as granular as needed to provide specifics into the racial makeup of the Graphic Design profession, Emsi, a company focused on labor market insights, provides a dataset on “Race/Ethnicity Breakdown by Occupation” in 2014, showing that 78% of jobs in the arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media were held by Whites (Not Hispanic or Latino).⁵ The 2016 speaker lineup at the most prominent Graphic Design conference created by AIGA, The Professional Association for Design, is composed of 112 speakers, from which there appear (as it is presumptuous to state for certain the racial identity of an individual based on a photograph) to be 82 Whites, 14 Blacks, 1 Hispanic/Latino, 6 Asians, and 9 other identifiable ethnicities and races—about 73% are White.⁶ The event website does note that there are more to come. Pivoting to industry leaders, AIGA’s Board of Directors seats 18 representatives of whom there appear to be 13 Whites, 2 Blacks, 2 Asians, and 1 Hispanic—about 72% are White.⁷ Additionally, the old guard in terms of the senior representatives of the field persists. Designer 01, who is White, recognizes this status quo, particularly as an impediment to innovation. She explains that

there’s like the old school mentality of design that sometimes is stuck with AIGA and it’s cliquy. And for me I know that’s been the hindrance, not hindrance of sorts, but still I’m a little disruptive here and I think a lot of people are cautious about that change.

³ AIGA, The Professional Association for Design. <http://aiga.org/diversity-design-technology-inneract-project-event>

⁴ AIGA, The Professional Association for Design. <http://aiga.org/diversity-design-technology-inneract-project-event>

⁵ Emsi. Interactive Graphic: EMSI’s New Race/Ethnicity Data by Occupation Group.

<http://www.economicmodeling.com/2014/11/19/interactive-graphic-emsis-new-raceethnicity-data-by-occupation-group>.

⁶ AIGA Design Conference. <http://designconference.aiga.org>.

⁷ AIGA, The Professional Association for Design. <http://aiga.org/board-of-directors>.

The acknowledgment of the institutional disconnect from the reality of those designing in the field and those represented gatekeepers at executive levels, is one of the reasons the research question carries relevance.

In the research of Victor Margolin, he shines a spotlight on the contributions of the diverse “others” such as African-American designers from the very early days of the profession who are habitually unrecognized.⁸ A critical point that this research presents is the distinction between visibility and participation. Like the existence of Chicagoan Black designers and those who followed, we see that these designers do exist—they are participants, yet they remain invisible, much like what is observed in the essay “Underground Matriarchy.”⁹ They are not represented in the public face of the profession, which results in the erasing of a people based on a dominant framework. There a lack of diversity, representation, and inclusion? The authors articulately state, “the lack of diversity in the public representation of Graphic Design reinforces the conflation of Anglo-European masculinity with a normative design identity” (Akama 37).¹⁰ What results is a narrowly defined canon for Graphic Design that absolutely calls into question its potential for growth. How do we retell the narrative of Graphic Design to actually represent its truth and give it the potential to be more than prescribed?

Assumptions

The analysis is based on the following four assumptions:

1. Creativity in Graphic Design thrives on diverse viewpoints and experiences
2. Greater racial diversity will yield greater creativity
3. Designers of non-dominant racial identity as it relates to the Visual Communication may offer new perspectives
4. These new perspectives may improve the creativity of the field

Conceptual Framework

What is the value of creativity, and how do we analyze the correlation between racial diversity and creativity standards. For the central questions regarding creativity, I consider Mark Batey’s framework. It is a unique heuristic for creativity

⁸ Margolin, Victor. “Needed: An Inclusive History of Chicago Graphic Design.” *inForm*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2001, pp. 1-5.

⁹ Haycock Makela, Laurie, and Ellen Lupton. “Underground Matriarchy in Graphic Design.” *Eye Magazine*, 1994, <http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/underground-matriarchy>.

¹⁰ Akama, Y., and C. Barnes. “Where Is Our Diversity? Questions of Visibility and Representation in Australian Graphic Design.” *Visual Design Scholarship*, vol. 4, no. 1 2009, pp. 29-40.

measurement that combines other frameworks in its formation. The framework is composed of three dimensions: level, facet, and measurement approach (59).¹¹

Batey categorizes the level dimension as the person(s) that is at the center of analysis: individual, team, organization, or culture. Next, is the facet dimension pertaining to what is analyzed: trait (person), process, press and product also known as the 4Ps. To clarify these terms better, Batey explains that traits relate to the personalities of the person or team, process to the approach of producing creativity, press to the environmental factors that may impact creativity, and product to the valuation of the creative output (59). Batey emphasizes the interdependence of these elements. As he states, creativity in this framework should be viewed “as the synergy of the 4Ps [and] indicates that, although a single facet of creativity may be investigated (e.g., process), no single facet exists without relation to other facets of creativity” (60). Completing the framework is the measurement approach. Batey includes three different forms of assessment: objective, self-rated, and those rated by others. Objective basis focuses on the actual outputs that could be measured, self-rated relies on the individual/teams perceptions, and the other-rated involves external judgment (60). This framework will provide guidance on the ways in which creativity can be understood and serve as a way into the complex, innate, most human of traits—creativity. I shall consider this model when evaluating modes for my design research even if it is to serve as a proxy for measuring creativity standards.

Findings

The interview data contains insightful accounts of individual experiences and perspectives. Challenging the traditional design standards is at the crux of this research; therefore, the focus of the findings will pertain to the standards of designers through the lens of Graphic Design creativity. While fourteen findings emerged, we will focus on four findings: 10 – 13. These findings were the result of Q6, where interviewees were asked:

- a. By person – Describe the epitome of a creative person?
- b. By process – Describe the optimal creative process?
- c. By environment – Describe the optimal creative environment?
- d. By product – Describe the optimal creative product?

¹¹ Batey, Mark. "The measurement of creativity: From definitional consensus to the introduction of a new heuristic framework." *Creativity Research Journal* 24.1. 2012.

Additionally, the review of the findings focuses on the responses of the Black designers. White designers will be considered where appropriate to gauge if responses are familiar or common against the status quo.

Finding #10

Designers build a model of an individual grounded in curiosity that is heightened through confidence, driven forward through persistence, and accomplished through their influence.

Finding #11

The process demands “being clear”: understanding & research, “being collaborative”: ideation & time, and having “deliberate intent”: feedback & solutions, all within the support of a healthy environment.

Finding #12

The optimal creative environment is a safe place that provides space for creative freedom and embraces inclusive and open-minded behavior, is co-created through the self and the actual individuals in the environment, and is adaptable to individual preferences.

Finding #13

The optimal creative product is one in which form and function are well designed and unified, though function takes the lead.

Analysis

Recalling Batey’s matrix of Person x Process x Press(Place) = Product, we can now reframe these findings through the Black principle. Through the lens of this principal, optimal creativity in the field can be identified and therefore created in the following way. As prerequisite, the creative person is curious and confident; however they also possess a level of power (influence/agency) and relentlessness (persistence) that wildly transforms that curiosity. That transformative process contains both ideation and incubation and requires the perfect harmony of process and place. The process relies on rich “design dialogue” which is contingent on an environment of diverse types (identity, experiences, skills, etc.) and that is safe and free. Within this framework, the product is created as a combination of function and form. While the drivers are dissimilar for the racial groups of designers, there seems to be an acceptance of the long-standing form and function dynamic that a designed product must contain.

Recommendations & Conclusion

This research has exposed a number of paths and also left a number of paths for further exploration. There are actions the design community can act upon now, other actions that may take a longer course, and still others that are contingent on larger societal shifts that will be realized from the outside in. Fundamentally, the research carves out a space for the voice of Black designers by finally considering those points of view against the established design canon. It is a means of signaling that the dominant voice should not necessarily equate to a norm or a stagnant standard. And, that the canon should be revisited and redesigned if those who uphold it dare to. Questions that the community can begin to answer and act upon follow.

- **What types of communities are we building?**
- **Who is leading these communities?**
- **What are our values?**

Additionally, there are specific recommendations for the Black designer in terms of what is needed to advance forward in the field based on their very voices.

- **Self-awareness**
- **Knowledge of history beyond the current curriculum**
- **An expanded design community**

This research, as one interviewee describes, is aimed at “developing those voices and developing the spaces” for those underrepresented in the design field.¹² The Black designer has served as my symbol for that group which includes designers of Latino/Hispanic and Native American ancestry. Such designers have not received an inclusive representation in Graphic Design present or past. We have not yet heard the various voices that make up the cadre of the profession. I have designed this thesis to share the colors, strokes and swatches of my design subjects and make meaning out of their shared experiences. Too often human culture gets comfortable with the status, and that is just not creativity. We need to shake things up in order to be our best by being different.

¹² P04 20160915