Visual Exploration of Identity as a Critical Tool to Disrupt Traditional Canons in Design Pedagogy

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This contribution discusses results from the implementation of undergraduate and graduate-level projects applied in traditional design studio settings to explore the visualization of identity. Since 2014, the author—a Central American woman of color teaching in public universities in Texas and Florida—has developed multiple hands-on class activities that focus on self-expression, self-awareness, memory, and positionality. In the undergraduate level, these activities start with the introduction of concepts and terminology from traditional design canons (i.e. principles from modernism, the Bauhaus, and other (mostly) Western European Avant Garde movements). Once students gain an understanding of these canonical principles, they embark in a self-discovery journey to determine whether these principles represent them, their context, background, and/or identity. Relevant discussions and reciprocal community-building occur during these processes in the classroom. In the graduate level, these visual explorations are based on introductory auto-ethnographic methods and studies focused on memory. At all times, these projects result in tangible design and art products—books, visual essays, collages, typographic compositions—, unveiling one-of-a-kind visual languages. The author reflects on the disruptive potential of these design activities. She refers to how the unearthing and visualization of unique knowledges inform critical perspectives of design thinking and making. By facilitating design methodologies that are curious and inclusive of the multiplicity of existing cosmosvisions, we help students to learn about and embrace pluriversal and collaborative concepts of design, giving them tools to formulate appropriate reactions to exclusionary, oppressive, marginalizing, and disrespectful design.

Keywords: pluriversality; visual language; design disruption; design pedagogy
Since 2009, I have worked as an educator and researcher who practices within the realms of social design. I explore how design serves as an instrument for promoting and improving collaboration, supporting community and context-based economies, unveiling hidden stories, and aiding othered peoples to elevate their voices. At the same time, I have undergone a process of recognition and criticality of traditional canons of knowledge, starting within the confines of my own academic studies—first, as a social communicator whose theoretical foundation is mostly informed by mid-1900s French male philosophers; later, as a designer who began her career learning, adopting, and promoting similarly traditional knowledges of Western, eurocentric origin, tightly attached to colonial concepts of modernity and modernism.

As a result, design research plays a fundamental role in my creative and pedagogical practice. These methods help us reimagine and conceive better and more sustainable futures. They also inform practical frameworks that help us address systemic oppression, social exclusion, and cultural discrimination that Western epistemologies, still present in traditional canons of knowledge, continue to perpetuate.

Consequently, my design research in the last twelve years has been extensively informed by dualities—whiteness vs brownness, Western vs indigenous epistemologies; universality vs pluriversality, North vs South. Reflecting on these and multiple other colonial/decolonial ambivalences have arisen numerous questions and internal dialogues on identity and knowledge-building in the context of social design practice and teaching. I am curious about our complexities as individuals within a context, how we determine belonging, and how we could “redesign” ourselves, our perspectives, and ways of living through time. I tend to ponder,

These kinds of inquiries directly inform my design teaching. For example, I am aware that the way I present myself in the community, with collaborators, peers, or in the classroom is read according to preconceived social and cultural constructs facilitated by design. At the same time, it may help determine how much I can engage others, particularly with design students, in critical, difficult, and/or sensitive issues and projects.

How much of our efforts aiming to expand our view of design (as a pluriversal and multimodal practice) is influenced by the peculiarities of one’s identity, and, therefore, defined by the specificities of a person’s context? Is there space for objectivity in this work?

How are colonialist knowledges and traditional canons (present in and aided by design and visual culture) internalized during childhood—a time that is critical to the formation of identity and the definition of one’s place in culture and/or society?

For Michel Foucault, this applies to all those excluded from power. (Chandler & Munday, 2016)
As I searched for alternative pedagogical tools to address my inquiries and to facilitate brave spaces (where multicultural knowledge can be built in traditional studio settings) in the undergraduate level, in 2014 I started to develop, implement, and test design projects and exercises that explore identity, heritage, storytelling, and visual culture through the introduction of traditional design concepts. How could these canons be disrupted? Students start by ideating the elements, topics, and conditions that represent them.

As a Central American immigrant and woman of color, I own a kind of expertise about myself, my background, and my context that is unique but that can inspire students who look like me to see beyond marginalizing design systems in order to become active makers of culture and producers of fresh knowledge.

My identity is a statement. It may help connect diverse processes of design knowledge-creation with critical thinking and making, resulting in epistemological disruptions and positive impact. Alternatively, it can help perpetuate existing canons where pluriversal processes of self-empowerment and imagining better futures are ignored.

In these design learning contexts, we have pragmatic discussions (cultural meanings of color, origin of stereotypes, visualization and communications of cultural or familial traditions, multilingualism, code switching) that evolve into more complex and sensitive conversations throughout the semester. I support these dialogues with the introduction of vocabulary and terminology explaining and confronting Western ideas of modernity, colonialist design practices, and knowledge hierarchies that may help perpetuate or promote oppression and exclusion, as well as the relation of these topics with the definition and development of our personal identities. The main focus is on their particular context.

In a safe environment, students practice critical thinking, open up to vulnerability, and participate in community-building through visual exploration. Students initiate internal and group dialogues to unveil elements of their identity as individuals and as members of particular communities (many underrepresented or historically marginalized or oppressed).

This leads to the unveiling of unique visual expressions.
Undergraduate design students in various levels responded to stereotypes and the commodification of (their) cultures during the discovery of their visual languages. The outcomes of this process includes the production of patterns, collages, typographic compositions, and illustrations, considering cultural symbols and iconography, context-based traditions, meal ingredients, celebrations, and fauna/flora from their communities. They employed different book formats as a medium to encapsulate their expressions.

These processes help students position themselves within complex topics that have defined their identity from various perspectives—from gender roles and sexual orientation to immigration, slavery and racism, diverse sensory abilities, and economic inequity. The creative exercises aim to elevate the unique qualities of their creative voices.

Conversion of use values into exchange values. Often regarded as subordinating real needs to manufactured desires in its pursuit of profit (Marxist theory).

(Chandler & Munday, 2016)
Visual explorations on heritage, identity, and self expression using genealogical, social, historic, and cultural research.

(Junior-level project)

J. Camelo,
University of Florida (2017)
Then, in 2017, I started to adapt these activities from the undergraduate to the graduate level. In graduate level spaces, topics related to narrative and memory helped me elevate the discussions that inform visual research and expression exercises. I have observed that graduate students are more open and willing to experiment with their work when inspiration comes from their particular historical contexts, family heritage and oral stories, ancestry, and cultural or social memories. The designerly outcomes of this visual research typify the unique elements of their personhood and positionality.
By facilitating design methodologies that are curious and inclusive of the multiplicity of existing cosmovisions, we help students to learn about and embrace pluriversal concepts of design and collaborative processes, giving them the necessary tools to formulate appropriate reactions to exclusionary, oppressive, and marginalizing design imaginaries and traditions.

In social design, these are key dynamics when preparing for working with others.
About the Author:

**Gaby Hernández** is a Costa Rican designer, educator, and researcher whose activities focus on equity, inclusion, anti-racism, and social justice, and their connection with design pedagogy and practice. She employs a myriad of multidisciplinary techniques and theoretical approaches, making her practice collaborative, horizontal, pluriversal, and dedicated to working with people (users of the products, systems, and design speculations she (co)develops) in their context. She designs experiences and guides new perspectives that help address problems that relate to cultural marginalization, repression, injustice, environmental decay, access to education, and the effects of “modernity.” She brings her own experiences of social, gender, and economic struggle to inform conversations around diversity, storytelling, and coloniality/decoloniality in the design classroom, as well as at national and international design conferences, journals, exhibitions, and multiple other design events. For over 10 years, she has worked closely with AIGA (the professional association for design in the United States) through lectures, workshops, and as a leader in the AIGA Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee and the AIGA Design Educators Steering Committee.