

TAKE ME | READ ME | SHARE ME | TAKE ME | READ ME | SHARE ME | TAKE ME | READ ME | SHARE ME

page 2 In the Beginning

VISCOMM DESIGN HAS BEEN EXCLUSIONARY, COLONIAL & RACIST

from WE Ring Self

HEAR NAH

VISUAL CREOLIZATION...

page 10

DIS TING

Describing a Caribbean Visual language: Seeing Creole

IN THE BEGINNING

**we created and...
continue to create new worlds.**

...there was design, whether you believe in the multitude of creation cosmologies or evolution, something happened for a particular outcome to lead to the desired result. The act of designing has always been with us as the need to create, but the word itself appeared in the 1600s and was translated from disegno (Sorabella, 2002). It is attributed to Giorgio Vasari, a Florentine artist and writer. Vasari described it as the father and foundation of all the visual arts, “the animating principle of all creative processes.” In Florence, disegno, which can be translated to “drawing” or “design,” was viewed as the essential beginning of all artistic endeavours, where art starts. Within design, the sketching of ideas and the act of drawing is not only the act of using lines to define form; it is the point from which an artist could express their inner vision, the beginning.

In his 2013 book *The Future as a Cultural Fact*, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defines design as “a fundamental human capacity and a primary source of social order.”¹ This definition of design expands and reiterates the often cited definition by Victor Papanek, designer and educator in his 1970s book *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*. Papanek revolutionised thoughts around design, specifically in the then-emerging field of social design; he described design as “the conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order.”² Both authors highlight the innate need for humans to create order which in this case is the function of design, naming it a core human function. Over the years, versions of design definition have been explored within academia as the role of the designer shifted from its intricate entanglement with advertising and capitalism to the categorization of designers as ideators, speculators, agents of change, and more.

Since the 1600s, design as a practice has been theorised in various ways— adding to this definition, dissecting, complicating and revealing new or old possibilities of design. Interestingly, design was hypothesised when the construct of the world as we know it was being designed – during the periods of modernity and enlightenment which coincide with the expansion of European powers, through exploration and colonisation into the Americas [inclusive of the Caribbean]. To fully understand the possible futures of design, in this case specifically visual communication, we need to understand the point of origin for design. But, when and where does design begin?

When does design begin?

The role of time in defining visual communication design is important, as it determines where design begins, how your view of design is shaped, and what is considered as “design”. Appadurai suggests that we can see the history of design as the history of humans where pre-state societies, in Asia, Africa, the Americas³ or the Islamic world have always utilised tenets of what is now professional design and social design.⁴ From functional objects for daily life to intricate society structures and cosmologies in harmony with their environments, before European contact, design existed. This has been widely discussed in the majority world by scholars since the emancipation proclamations and to independence movements by thinkers such as Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Angela Davis, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Dr. Eric Williams, Fausto Reinaga, Pablo Gonzalez Casanova, Cedric Robinson, Ali Shariati, Malek Bennabi, Ho Chi Minh, Enrique Dussel and groups the Modernity and Coloniality group, Arthur Escobar, Anibal Quijano, Rolando Vázquez, Elizabeth Tuntall, Ramón Tejada and more.

But for many designers like myself our design textbooks excluded and thereby erased the impact of non-EuroAmerican cultures on the design field, unless those cultures were assimilated and appropriated into Eurocentric hegemony. In my design texts, there was little to no information on the role or impact on graphic design of different cultures. For instance, beyond the much-theorised hieroglyphics and cuneiform research, there were few discussions about the impact of ancient logographic writing systems on typography from various ethnic groups in Africa, Asia or the Americas.

The epistemological ignorance by the Eurocentric ‘design canon’, from which I was taught, decries the natural urge of all humans to create ways of communication and representation. Visual means of communication existed in these societies through logographic and typographic forms before the advent of the printing press. The influence of 11th century block printing techniques by a Chinese alchemist, Pi Sheng, was pivotal in the printing technologies used in the Gutenberg press, which brought movable type to Europe. I learnt about the impact of mechanised design technology on typography as it heralded the “start” of modern-day graphic design, but not about the origins and inspiration of the technology.

This lack of citing and acknowledging inspiration can also be stated that design often ‘borrows’⁵ from art and many times art was ‘inspired’ by cultures that were

1 Appadurai, Arjun. 2013. “The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition”. The Social Life of Design 253- 267 London: Verso Books.

2 Papanek, Victor. 1985. *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*. 3-28 London: Thames and Hudson.

3 Along with Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas were the earlier named continents.

4 (Appadurai 2013, 255)

5 Borrowing and inspiration here are used loosely, as many times it is an outright plagiarism, appropriation and stealing of designs and visualisa-

otherised because they didn't fit into the categories. However, these cultural inspirations are neither cited in art or graphic design, nor were their contributions considered to have an impact on design of the past or present, despite being sometimes blatantly visible.⁶

Who defines design?

'Graphic design' as a term was coined in 1922, by American type designer and illustrator, William Addison Dwiggins, when there were concerted efforts by governments and enterprises to bolster post-war economies in Europe and North America after World War I. However, earlier forms of visual communication, beyond marketing, existed before the term graphic design arrived in our lexicons. Specifically, the discipline and industry of graphic design have often overlooked its dark history that runs concurrently with the popular origin story of the Industrial Age (Pater 2021, 23).

However, because of my Afro-Caribbean heritage, it is impossible for me to untangle⁷ modernity/coloniality⁸ with the technological advancements which laid the foundations for the industrial revolution in Europe. In 16th and 17th century, via the transatlantic trade i.e. the dislocation and the enslavement of Africans in European colonies of the Americas, handbills and broadsides were made by sign painters and typesetters to 'advertise' the sale of kidnapped and trafficked humans, and later to also offer rewards for the capture of self-liberated Africans and their indigenous co-conspirators. But these ephemeral ads are rarely connected to design history taught in design programs.⁹

Appadurai in his essay *The Social Life of Design* suggested that we should examine design history as human history (Appadurai 2013, 254). From that point of view, we can conclude that graphic design history is interwoven with advertising through capitalism. The colonial exploits by European powers particularly Portugal, Spain, England and France in the Americas impacted and entangled the advertising industry which is connected to visual communication of today. The havoc wreaked by colonisation should be a part of the design history that is taught.¹⁰

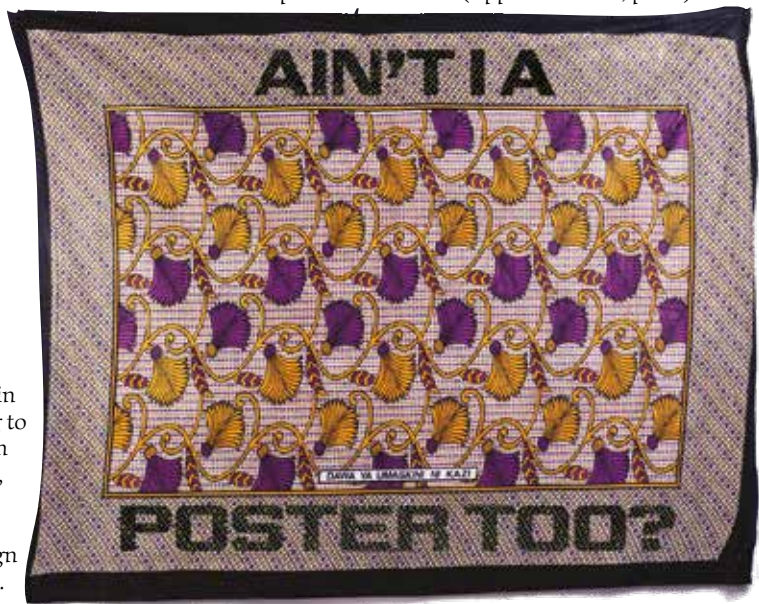
Previously, design discourse would situate its history without the necessary impact of colonisation that handbills and broadsides had on advertising and design history in Europe and North America. But this is changing slowly within academia, in spite of reservations of not wishing to make design political – this annotation to design history is crucial. It seems that, in design history, the contributions of places and peoples who survived colonial and imperialist oppression are purposefully omitted in an effort to detach design from this lineage infected with colonial violence.

By purifying graphic design's history and not acknowledging this reference to enslavement and the former European colonies, design history erases that which doesn't fit the narrative of western European and American design, often synonymous with "good design". Dr. Luiza Prado de O. Martins, in a lecture on *Decolonizing Design education*¹¹ stated that "within a system of racial hierarchy (coloniality), the European subject was positioned as superior to all others, and conversely other subjects by those colonised, and those enslaved were considered expendable."

According to Dr. Luiza Prado de O. Martins, there have been deliberate acts of systemic repression of indigenous knowledges while expropriating knowledge describing it as, "epistemic violence that is a deliberate project of coloniality and something that is enacted by the discipline of design." Design is complicit in the advancement of the ideology of universality and homogeneity that is associated with modernism and has excluded many narratives.

Where does design begin?

Having established that design, as a form of visual communication, did not only occur in European and North American contexts, we should examine: where does design even begin? Within design academia, I am constantly directed to the "west", so I searched a bit wider into other fields. Through defining design in the broader lens of anthropology, we can understand and highlight the power that design has held in the past, primarily in times of colonisation and its ripple effect today. Appadurai in his book goes on to explain that, "Design is a capacity that we exercise all the time", and it was expressed in a variety of ways and everywhere in pre-state societies (Appadurai 2013, p.254).



tions that are significant in specific cultures without recognition of the cultures. I often ask who gets to borrow, appropriate, and steal w h e n power dynamics are at play.

6 (Bennett 2020)

7 Modernity/coloniality here refers specifically to the histories of Europeans—Spaniards, Portuguese, Dutch, French, British, Germans who invaded, appropriated, and expropriated the land in the Americas and the Caribbean. Settling and making colonies, in an attempted genocide of the native population and the great civilizations of the "New World."

8 (Diallo and Mignolo 2014)

9 (BIPOC Design Group 2021)

10 (Tunstall 2016)

11 (Prado de O. Martins et al. 2021)

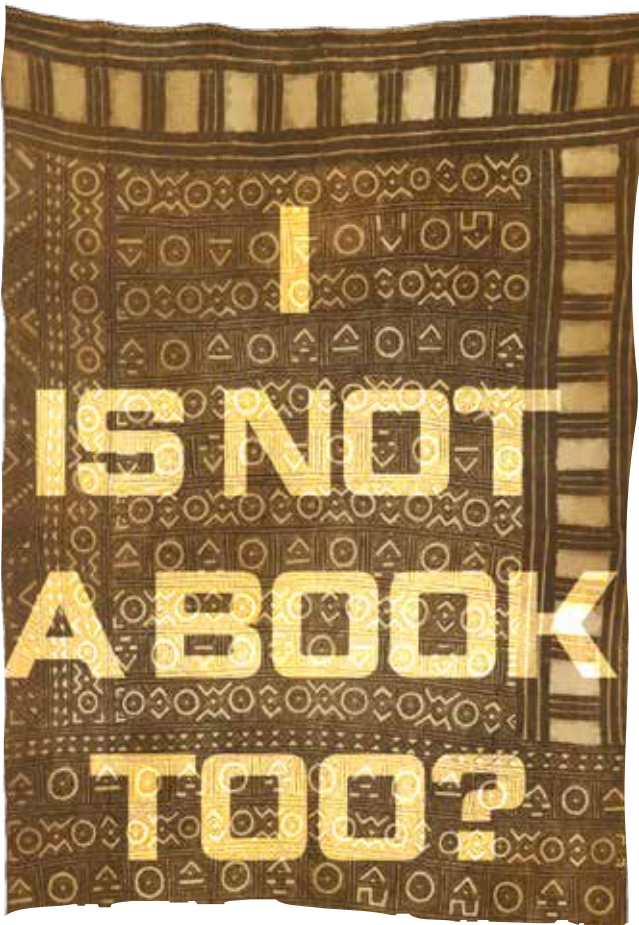
Image captions and citations

Page 3: Unknown, Dawa ya masikini ni kazi (Medicine to poverty is employment), Cotton, unknown, Photo by GibbsPhotography (National Museums of Kenya), <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/kanga/iAGN8zZzPZHnLg>

This kanga with a black outer border and central motif with pineapple designs with an outer border of small purple and yellow flavours. The Swahili proverb "Dawa ya masikini ni kazi" (Medicine to poverty is employment) is at the bottom of the design. Each Kanga contains illustration and text, could this textile that has been a part of a variety of cultures before African colonisation be seen as a poster?

Page 4: Bamana people group, Bògòlanfini (mudcloth), Cotton, 1925/1975, Photo by (Trustees of the British Museum), <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/mud-cloth-bogolanfini/AAEd7cUD7ydhRQ>

The Bògòlanfini is a West African textile with a cotton base. Individual strips of cloth are woven and then sewn together to make a larger textile. Each of the complex coded patterns are named, tells stories commemorating historical events and reflects the natural world. The Bògòlanfini shares a message with its intended audience who understands the code in the patterns, can this be seen as a poster or a book which tells a story?



These societies had intricate systems of trade and exchange, complex philosophical and mathematical knowledges that are still being decoded. Things that we are taught to only value for their aesthetic value actually have great significance to these societies; sculptures held histories, calendars that predicted the future, textile traditions that passed on stories, printing techniques,

their unique means of typography or calligraphy, and more. In these pre-state societies, many of which are now independent countries, there is a depth of knowledge that indigenous ways of making and creating are imbued within their designs which surpass aesthetics and function. Cultures around the world have embedded knowledge within their ways of expressing and creating, from the knotted language systems of the Andean Quipus in South America, the memory and heritage holders of the Benin Bronzes, to the detailed Mayan calendars, Chinese silk garments, Islamic calligraphy, to Australian aboriginal kinship systems, to name a few.

However, this lack of acknowledgement of inspiration of cultures from the majority world, which can be seen as appropriation by the North American-Eurocentric design canon, is slowly changing within academic circles. This is thanks in part to the work of groups like Decolonizing Design (2016), *Where Are the Black Designers* (2020), *BIPOC Design History* (2021), and *Futurress* (2020), all of which have taken the discourse of the ways in which design has been oppressive to minoritized groups beyond the academic context. Also, more design researchers are dealing with topics that add to the conversation around decoloniality, and are annotating the dominant narrative with their design histories. There are also many design practitioners (often outside the academy) who have begun educating themselves on narratives and design practices that have been erased or silenced. They have also become aware of the effects of not acknowledging their inspiration sources and the negative impact that erasure has on communities that have been marginalised. Still, design as taught in many formerly colonised countries is based on Western hegemony, told by its history as only happening in Europe and North America. The construction and focus within design syllabi centres the western canon with little regard for the indigenous and local design aesthetic of the country.

WE CREATED AND...

How design has been exclusionary and colonial

After expanding my understanding of the definition of design, I thought about the classification of design like product design, industrial design, graphic design, interactive design etc. Many of these classifications tend to omit the design of cultures that do not fall within Eurocentric imaginations of design, but are instead considered something other than design itself, like craft, traditional art, folk art¹² or vernacular design. All of which are considered less than and not equivalent to categories within professional design. According to Argentinian sociologist Walter Mignolo and Mexican sociologist Rolando Vázquez, this idea of creating classifications of aesthetics can be traced in the 18th century to Immanuel Kant's mutation of the Greek concept aesthetic to mean "regulate sensing the

12 Folk art in this case speaks specifically to the 'artwork' from outside of Europe that were classified as this without understanding meanings of them or rationale for creating.

beautiful and sublime.”¹³ With this explanation, one can see why design would be complicit in the same way that art has been in creating countless differentiators within the field.

Mignolo and Vázquez go on to share that this genesis of ‘modern aesthetics’ emerged from and centred the local European experience and its history, with this “sense” becoming the measure to which everything else was evaluated.¹⁴ Colonisation not only affected land, but also knowledge creation and dissemination; with regard to aesthetics, many cultures were left devastated. Their means of expression and sensing the world was erased, silenced and in some cases forcefully replaced with the dominant European aesthetic. Moreover, their ways of making and creating i.e. designing, when evaluated through Kant’s theory, non-Eurocentric art and design was negated as folk/traditional art and now a new misnomer vernacular design.

Maybe it’s time that designers, artists, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians from the global majority whose ‘artworks’ are in museums have access to evaluate them within the contextualization of their societies and by today’s understanding of design. I believe these ‘artworks’ would be rightly described as designed objects¹⁵ fitting into various categories of design. The colonial nature of modern aesthetics created this scale of value in how we think about art from previously colonised places and how we think about design languages today. This value system and way of categorising excludes many societies’ and communities’ indigenous ways of creating and making. These values were held by a western European society that believed that some artistic expression, innovation and ingenuity is more valuable because of its origins and ‘skill’ of creators.¹⁶ This society that believed they needed to ‘civilise’ the Americas, Africa, Asia, Australia and the Pacific region, imposing their belief systems onto them – erasing and crippling their indigenous systems of knowledge and ways of sensing through a universal aesthetic.

Universality then became a tool of power and control used to flatten other means of sensing and experiencing the world. These notions of aesthetics were pivotal in the development of modern design, where aesthetics and function are rooted in the modernist tradition as perpetuated by the Eurocentric design canon. Design within this canon operates in the same way, with its roots of subjugation and ‘othering’ intact. Design from a Eurocentric lens which prioritised universality was utilised in Trinidad and Tobago after we gained independence from England, in 1962 and still prevails today. The spread and prevalence of universality as the dominant design language can also be seen in other previously colonised countries after independence, where design as an industry and field was adopted from Europe or America through established advertising agencies. Often, there is little to no adaptation to the local design aesthetic – but not without resistance by the local designers who attempt to preserve aspects of their local aesthetic.

How has design been racist?

Another foundation of design was rooted in the erasure of cultural markers and meaning from design, which devalued the indigenous ways of creating and making for many communities. Architect Adolf Loos, in a 1907 publication, *Wohnungswanderungen* (Residential walking tours), noted “the evolution of mankind goes hand in hand with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects.” This concept was further theorized in his seminal work *Ornaments and Crime*.¹⁷ Within the book he spews racist speculations proposing that cultural evolution and development comes from the stripping away of any cultural meaning, heritage and tradition within designed objects¹⁸.

This book is still discussed and used in design curricula, and these concepts which started in architecture quickly spread into the budding graphic design field. This ideology, together with American architect Louis Sullivan’s maxim “form follows function”¹⁹ (Sullivan, 1896) spread within modernist circles and informed the practices of many prominent designers. The maxim was taken as a call to simplify, to present aesthetics that are functional, appealing and universal, building on the foundation that Kant laid. Later, these designers who found solace in these approaches became the framework in which many designers fashioned their practices and eventually a canon was created that centres Eurocentrism as a default excluding many.²⁰

The concept of universality not only excludes WE the many, who are not from Europe or North America, but also prejudices and discriminates directly against our ways of designing. These few examples highlight specifically how design has been exclusionary, colonial, discriminatory and prejudiced, but there are other elements that impacted the design field within previously colonised countries, which are vast and can’t at this time be explored within the context of this thesis. For example, our design industries and fields are affected by the design history and progress of the former colonial/imperial powers, the adoption of technological advancements within the countries, and design education that do not consider the local needs among others.

Where do we go from here: How does design move forward?

Design in the majority world in previously colonised countries should be something different. Maybe ‘design’ in these places and spaces should be accepting and inclusive of their cultures, without the need to strip away meaning for universal appeal. What if this ‘ting’ is not called design anymore? What if the ways in which design moves away from western hegemony and into the realm of decolonial healing, recovery of ancestral memory and active practising of our indigenous ways of making and creating?

13 (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013)

14 (Ibid)

15 Object here is not used to undermine the subjectivity of the creations of indigenous communities that celebrate the lives of their ancestors (Soh 2018) but to loosely highlight the definition of design as a fundamental human capacity (Appadurai 2013, p254).

16 (Tunstall 2013, p.235)

17 (Long 1997, p. 441)

18 (Liernur 2008, p.11)

19 The complete quote is “form ever follows function”

20 (Scotford 1994, p. 369)

Design as viewed through the lens of western hegemony has a limited scope of what can be considered 'design' based on its historical definitions and categorizations, but one thing rings true: the idea of universality can no longer be sustained in postcolonial countries. In the Decolonial Aesthetics Dossier, Mignolo and Vázquez highlight why modern aesthetics should not be the point of origin for design in the majority world: "The belief that uni-versal is one is the fiction of western civilization and modern aesthetics."²¹

Design, particularly visual communication, should be dethroned from this grossly inaccessible and highly skilled profession due to expensive design school tuition or specialty programs, to become a new thing which we use to reflect and articulate the intricacies of our visual languages. Why can't it simply be a means to think through and with, instead of a superpower of the problem solver? This Ting should be decolonial, antiracist and operated intersectionally – making space for many ways of sensing the world, through a variety of experiences in our societies. Mignolo and Vázquez go on to propose a countermeasure to universality: "Pluriversality is composed of many universalities and it departs from decolonizing the Eurocentred fiction of one universality."²²

Maybe this is where we start, at the point where we...

CONTINUE TO CREATE NEW WORLDS

Much of the knowledge I've gained in the past year about decoloniality is written from the South American perspective as it has points of theoretical origins there. The term was new to me – a racialised woman from a (constructed) marginalised society in the designed society of the "global south." However, as I internalised its meaning, I realised it was something that I've known my entire life, just by a different name. My scholars and philosophers were the musicians that took these sometimes convoluted theories and made it into digestible notions through songs. For me, understanding of decoloniality came in the words of Bob Marley and the Wailers as they echoed Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican pioneer of the Pan-African movement, "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds." As a ten-year-old child from Morvant, an impoverished village in Trinidad, these words were not only of hope that better will come, but as I would learn later, they were also a plan for freedom and liberation.

It must be acknowledged that decolonisation²³ is not a metaphor to be conjured or joined to fields like design, without the acknowledgment of the origins of the project that now bleeds (literally and figuratively) from the Landback movements and into the liberation of the indigenous people from structures of white supremacy and oppression. As highlighted in Decolonization is not a metaphor²⁴:

21 (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013)

22 (Ibid)

23 Decolonisation is a term based in the ideology of indigenous populations from the Americas and has been adopted by other indigenous communities worldwide fighting for the reclaiming their native land from colonisers and settlers.

24 (Tuck and Yang 2012, p. 3)

25 (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013)

26 (Prado de O. Martins et al. 2021)

27 (Vázquez 2020, p. 163)

28 (Ibid, p.117)

29 (Ibid, p.164-168)

"Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym."

Since colonisation was and is a global project, the act of decolonising and enacting decoloniality should be as well.²⁵ In the past ten years, discourse around decolonising design has been pervasive within universities and museums in Europe and North America with many conferences and classes having decolonisation themes. But decolonisation has been a living topic in the global majority among independence movements from as early as 1800s to more recently in the 1960s. From all of the discussion and discourse I've been engaged in and seen, there are a few takeaways that I think all designers should be aware of, mainly: there is no right way or one way to design, and visual communication design should be based on your local design language.

There is no right way to design

To understand that there is no right way or one way to design is to discard the idea of universality. Visual communication can't be seen in this way if we want to enact decolonisation as a means to acknowledge plurality in our design languages.

What could it mean for the design to be seen through a decolonial lens? This question in the past few years has been popular in academic discussion trying to address it and many approaches in universities and museums seem to want to find ways of incorporating 'decolonisation' but as Luiza Prado states: "it is not possible to use decoloniality as a coat of fresh new paint to wash away the sins of the past."²⁶ Rolando Vázquez shares that "Decoloniality is not a field of expertise, a 'decolonial studies' but rather a field of practice."²⁷

Decolonization can only happen from the point of demolishing the systems that uphold structures of coloniality and oppression. Structures have to be demolished and reconsidered– maybe we don't need structures or if we do they should be envisioned from a decolonial, pluriversal lens. At an institutional level it is difficult to enact, but Vázquez shares how it can be done by asking "the what, the who and the how". What is curated, collected, taught, investigated etc.? Who is speaking, representing, validating? Who are the artists, the students, professors, Who feels welcomed? The how asks about the practices within the institutions.

On the individual level of the practising designer, it can be a practice which adheres to decolonial principles, which can open up a new way to think through and with design, and give designers a critical lens. He outlines a method of orienting our design practices through asking questions, curating, learning, thinking and making by confronting modernity, coloniality, the colonial difference²⁸ and what it means to decolonise.²⁹

There is no one way to design

Decoloniality shows that there is no one way to design when we each bring our unique perspective, and pluriversality says that there are many ways to design as we make room for many perspectives. More perspectives allow us to make room for other ways of designing that are authentic to each person, giving permission to bring to the table all the intersections in which we exist. Feminist scholars and theorist have embedded this into their work after Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989. Designers have also implemented measures that make work less universal and more relatable to persons who identify with them.

Pluriversality is a growth that comes from the awareness of the failures of the current systems of knowledge, knowledge production and its dissemination. As Mignolo shares, “pluriversality is the name and the horizon of all decolonial trajectories today, on the planet, arising from the awareness of repressive forces of coloniality.”³⁰

Does thinking in a pluriversal way when designing open more questions than answers?

Possibly, you question through whose lens are you viewing the world. Is your worldview tinted by powers you can't imagine or see (and which we all are tainted by: capitalism, imperialism and or colonialism)? These questions that arise may never be answered, but the awareness it brings to the issues are relevant. We may need to sit with these questions for as long as needed, without trying to provide a solution, but just to understand.

30 (Reiter 2018, p. 94)

31 (Ibid, p. 95)

32 (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013)

Mignolo points out that for the pluriverse to materialise it is necessary to relink with whatever is relevant in each specific project, and to connect with coexisting decolonial projects in different areas (sexuality, racism, religion, economic, art, knowledge) and in different parts of the planet.³¹

Pluriversality is primarily the work of engaging with knowledge that exists many times in different cultural spheres, designers who practice plurality may find their practice taking a more transdisciplinary format. Unlike universality, pluriversality can't be designed, managed or dictated. “Pluriversality is composed of many universalities and it departs from decolonizing the Eurocentered fiction of one universality – that of its own local and regional history.”³² This shows that pluriversality can't exist in a vacuum as there are many sides to be connected across topics, borders, and ideologies.

Today we begin to see a shift where designers and researchers are searching for their local and indigenous ways of making and creating – our version of design and our design language which feels authentic to us. Like myself, designers have also begun to examine the implication of doing design in one particular way, because we are taught to replicate this way to even get into the profession. We choose to venture into the wild world of research to uncover these things on our own.

Designers and design educators like Ramón Tejada, Pilar Castillo, Shannon Doronio Chavez, Roberto Rodriguez, MJ Balvanera, Laura Rossi García, Jason Alejandro, Anna Parisi, Juan Pablo Rahal are a few in the Caribbean diaspora exploring incomplete Latinx Caribbean design histories and those who are digging into their ways of doing and making, didn't get this knowledge in design schools.

Burning through big ideas

F.I.R.E. METHOD

Frame:

- Create and understand the context of your topic
- Make connections with other disciplines if necessary
- Don't be afraid to look back to move forward, but also look around

Identify and Investigate:

Define your goals

What do you want to research?

Dig in that direction

Research/ Redefine:

Solidify the topics being researched

Define how deep or how wide you want to dig

Redefine if you need to pivot

(you are not starting from zero, but with more knowledge than before)

Execute and Experiment:

Put knowledge to work

Experimenting is learning by doing and part of the research process

Execute the goals for your research



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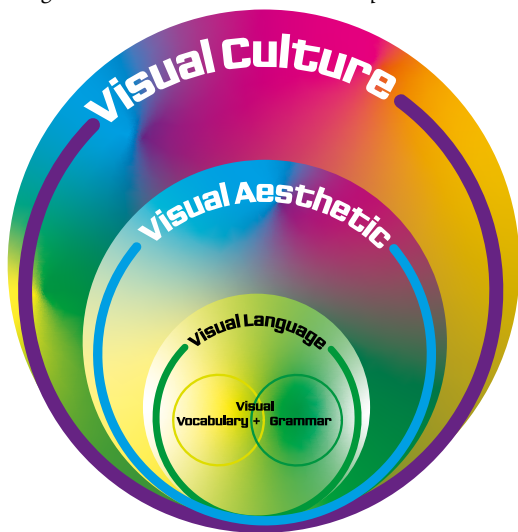
DESIGN LANGUAGES
BEYOND THE DOMINANT
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DISTING

DESCRIBING A CARIBBEAN VISUAL LANGUAGE: SEEING CREOLE

Visual design in Trinidad and Tobago is viewed as a small part of visual arts and the creative industry. Design has not been given as much priority as fine arts or carnival studies, areas in which there is a clear linear history. Among the community of younger designers, we have begun to explore what design can be beyond a job in an advertising agency, and the question of “what is the Caribbean aesthetic?” surfaced in the 2010s. This question has been discussed extensively in design circles and my inquiry into this aesthetic has led me to question: what the visual language of Trinidad and Tobago might be? I have come to believe that the visual language is part of the aesthetic and that the visual design language within the Caribbean has developed similarly to the development of the creole language.

The development of a visual language has been outlined in the paper “Read, Translate, Compose and Evaluate: Visual Language skills.”³³ that discusses the visual literacy movement. In this paper scholars determined that visual language is refined when a child learns verbal language skills with each language complementing the other.³⁴ The paper proposes the components of visual language within visual communications as the visual vocabulary, the syntax and grammar. The vocabulary consists of basic elements: colour, tone, line, size, shape, light, and shade. The syntax (or context) refers to the elements in a composition either in space, in a series or a sequence of visuals in time and it is the way in which the vocabulary is used which can modify the meaning being transmitted. The grammar of a visual language is the description of the arrangements of the basic elements in space and time.³⁵



Defining creole and describing creolisation

Defining an aesthetic is indeed a Herculean task that I didn't have the capacity to explore, but I can explore what contributes to an aesthetic, the visual language and visual vocabulary of Trinidad and Tobago. Ernst Gombrich, Austrian art historian, shares that it is art, specifically graphic arts that bears a strong analogy to language. To describe the visual language I first looked at the verbal language, creole. Describing an aesthetic is more fluid and lends itself to the process of decolonisation and plurality as creating definitions reinforces colonial structures and its inclinations to create hierarchies.

In the Caribbean, the development of the creole languages occurred in the cultural, social and linguistic mixing of the indigenous Americans, Africans and Europeans in the islands. A starting assumption in my inquiry is that the development of the creole verbal language in Trinidad and Tobago happened simultaneously with the development of a creole visual language and Caribbean aesthetic through the same process of creolisation. Caribbean writers at home and in the diaspora such as Lousie Bennette Coverley, Heather Smyth, Édouard Glissant, Françoise Vergès, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Marie Lousie Pratt, and Stuart Hall, to name a few, have explored creole and the process of creolisation to describe the language and means of representation in cultural and linguistic studies.

Creole's most common usage is as a way of describing the vernacular form of language which has developed in the colonies and become the 'native tongue' of the majority of its inhabitants, through the combining of elements of European (mainly French) and African languages. It was long considered a debased, corrupted 'patois' or 'bad French' (or English) spoken by 'the natives'. Édouard Glissant describes the creole language as a language that is always open and which is never fixed or definitive and creolisation as one of the ways of forming a complex mix that is process based, not content focused, yielding more than a linguistic result. Stuart Hall expands and describes creolisation as the 'cultural and linguistic mixing' which arise from the entanglement of different cultures in the same indigenous space or location, primarily in the context of slavery, colonisation and the plantation societies characteristic of the Caribbean and parts of Spanish America and Southeast Asia. Hall's description goes on to expand on the creolisation process to describe it as 'présences': présence africaine, présence européenne and présence américaine (Hall, 1990).

Hall goes on to share that présence africaine is the often hidden element which was rarely allowed to speak in its own voice, the voice of 'Africa' which is 'alive and well

33 (Clayback, Goforth, and Spillman 1980)

34 (Ibid p. 629)

35 (Ibid p. 629)

in the diaspora'. It is the powerful presence belonging to the excluded majorities which are not solely African. *Présence européenne*, is the dominant colonising voice that speaks all the time, everywhere, and is the one we can never not hear. This voice is the echoes of the influences of the French, British, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish empires which became 'indigenised' within Caribbean society. *Présence américaine* refers to the 'primal scene' of violent expropriation and conquest – the continent of 'America' as the "New World". It is the 'site' of a tabooed desire, where the scandal of 'cultural miscegenation' between these worlds collide and the disruptive force of 'the local', the indigenous – the site of the vernacular.

I agree with Hall's analysis and would like to propose that due to the *présence africaine*, *présence européenne* and *présence américaine*, each group's way of sensing the world also expanded when we came together in the Caribbean. I believe that not only did creolisation occur within the development of the language but simultaneously also the way of perceiving aesthetics and viewing the world changed. Trinidad and Tobago, being the site of this cultural mixing, consisted of the Africans and indentured servants who brought their skilled in crafts, manufacturing, engineering, botany, and other competencies needed to run the labour intensive industry of the colonies. The Europeans imposing their aesthetics from their empires, first the Spanish as the first colonist and settlers, the French who settled and really propelled the slave trade during the *Cedula of Population*, and the British who we gained independence from after a hundred and sixty-five years of crown colony rule. Each group brought their expertise and became an integral part of the fabric of the society contributing to our way of making and creating this "new world", through a sort of visual creolisation.

Visual creolisation

Visual creolisation is a way of seeing from all the interjections and intersections in which the aesthetics exist and mixed within the Caribbean, that goes beyond binaries of a single way to do "good design". It brings together the subversive aesthetics of *présence africaine* that survived the brutal process of British colonialism that tried to eradicate it. The survival of the folk stories that held the secrets of proverbs, the masquerade and festival characters which made their way into the carnival to tell new and exciting stories all passed on the knowledge of our ancestral ways to express ourselves. The *présence européenne* is the way in which we are taught to express our creativity within the norm of western hegemony, and it forms another way of seeing in this specific place. Within design the European presence is the dominant voice. We are taught the design of Europe, to replicate the design language of England and now North America, although there is a local design aesthetic that surround us. These ways of seeing and expression all exploding in this place, across time – merging and morphing into its own creole visual language.

The visual language that creole describes is something that we already do, but which we have not fully explored its description. I see visual creolisation as a vital process of

decolonization of our aesthetics. Within creolization there is always a power dynamic at play, as is inherent in the nature of a previously colonized countries where you are always in contention and negotiation of what view would be reinforced. Visual creolization is not the representation of one or the other but the representation of all aesthetics together. Its the point of translating the ancestral and intuitive ways in which we create are expressed through the means by which we learn to express ourselves. It's also a point of transfiguration from cultural creative processes into design that prioritises craftsmanship, storytelling and honoring the process to create our stories.

Visual creolisation is not a style of design or design trend but a culture of creating - the philosophy and act of designing with a rich maximal aesthetic, mixed from many aesthetics that influenced this specific visual language. Stuart Hall explained it beautifully when he mentions that "creolisation speaks about the creation of new articulations not inscribed in any hegemonic script. It is the creation of a new vocabulary that transcends the normative order still invested in recreating the colonial gaze."³⁶

Forged from the love of liberty

The way we do design in the context of Trinidad and Tobago is not reflected in the way design is taught. We see visual communication design as a call to action (typical of advertising) but its mainly an action, in which we express our stories. Beyond advertising one of the main expressions of visual communications is through our two day carnival performances, Trinitobagians simply call *mas*. *Mas* has hid and held the stories of the Africans from their emancipation in 1834 until today. It was the mocking performance of the European masquerade, blended with the stories the Africans merged into a ways in which freedom was expressed but also shared and communicated. In the almost two hundred year history of Carnival, the design aspects of *mas* has evolved using a variety of costume designs, incorporation of new technologies, materials and stories of the other minoritized groups such as the East Indians and Chinese.

The visual language which emerged from Carnival enriched the visual culture and aesthetic of Trinidad and Tobago. Yet this history of storytelling and design that encouraged Carnival celebrations in other Caribbean island and within the diaspora is not reflected in the visual communication design syllabus. I assume that this history isn't taught because there is no clear line that neatly identifies it as visual communication design as in some countries and *mas* still isn't viewed as visual communications. But that is based on what your definitions of visual communication design are, where you believe it history begins and what you believe visual communication design should look like.

In our entangled history, mapping art and design from time before European contact to current visual representation is near impossible, due to the gaping holes bearing the violence of colonisation and the mixing of the ways in which we create. While some may have a clear path from fine arts to design, the merging of sculpture, costumes, performance art of Carnival with fashion and other modes of expression makes

36 (Hall 2015, p. 7)

those distinctions unclear. Classifications, hierarchical stratification and ideas of separations are sometimes ungraspable in Trinidad and Tobago, which might be a reaction to the traumatic memory of colonialism or an inclination to mix everything together to create something new, through the decolonial process of creolisation.

Dais We Ting Self

Although our design language isn't being reflected in our visual communication design syllabus or the industry and advertising just yet, there has been a wave of discussions that may lead to a change soon. Designers who work in the industry and those whose practice align with art are the ones leading the discussions and with their work. To get a deeper and better understanding of the impact of our design language and process of creolisation within design, I've interviewed practitioners who have been pivotal to those discussions and who have been creating space for the design to be more than advertising. They have all been important in my research and my own process of decolonizing my perceptions of design.

Tanya Marie Williams-Rhule

is a designer at Studio Tanya Marie, founding creative director and editor of Designer Island. For the past ten years Designer Island has been a lifestyle brand and magazine focusing on creativity within the Caribbean, it was there that I first heard discussions about the Caribbean aesthetic in a 2012 interview with writer Ayanna Gillian Lloyd.



Keegan Simon is a Tastemaker, Artist and Merchandiser. After gaining his artistic foundation at the Edna Manley College of Visual Arts in Jamaica, he returned home to Trinidad, to pursue a Master's Degree in Creative Design. Marrying his commercial and artistic pursuits in The Individual Aesthetic he creates conceptual graphically-charged apparel infusing Trinbagonian and Caribbean cultures, producing art "for us, by us".



We start with learning with Tanya-Marie and Keegan from their journey in "In search of an aesthetic" and continue the conversation in "On definitions and descriptions" considering how we explore visual language and aesthetics with Christopher and Marlon.

In search of an aesthetic

Cherry-Ann Davis: How would you define or describe the Caribbean aesthetic?

Tanya Marie Williams-Rhule (TMR): Designer Island started with the question of what is the Caribbean aesthetic because I didn't know what it was, and I

was getting tired of seeing what was projected as a Caribbean aesthetic. In advertising, it is signalled through hand-drawn text, tie-dye and coconut trees, a regurgitated cliché and stereotype. As the magazine and my own work grew and evolved, I realised that that is part of it but it is also so much more than that. I also noticed that the more I asked questions to different people, the greater variety of answers there were as to what is the aesthetic.

In a conversation recently with another designer on the aesthetic of Trinidad and Tobago, I continued to question what it might mean. He shared, "It's not that we don't have an aesthetic, but it's whether we like that aesthetic? Is it defined? Do we like the aesthetic that is identified as Trinbagonian? Is the idea of that aesthetic correct?" I agreed with him that design is not defined or documented, noting that our design industry is much younger than Europe or North America but graphic design has never been a priority nor has been defining design. These are things that need to be considered when discussing if we have an aesthetic or not?

CAD: Keegan how would you describe or define the aesthetic?

Keegan Simon (KS): The Caribbean aesthetic is similar among the islands but they all have their beautiful idiosyncrasies. Within the islands, we know there is no universal and we accept it knowing that there is a (visual) language common enough to communicate, but speaking the individual creole shows respect to the culture that you work within. We have multiple narratives happening all at once, and not one main accepted universal narrative. Our design reflects the local; our culture has been constant within our design language, and there is now a greater appreciation of it.

Our culture is so rich and we take it for granted. It's almost as if we have little self-worth and belief in ourselves. The "foreign is better" mindset is deeply rooted in the psyche of Trinbagonians and I think "we on shit" [we are acting irresponsibly], the older generations including millennials (over 30 years). Luckily this younger generation has a more worldly view because of greater access to foreign influences and appreciation of the local. I'm passionate about our culture and I hope one day that things would be different, when we have evolved from wanting validation from foreign sources.

CAD: I'm glad Keegan mentioned culture. How do you see its role in design, Tanya?

TMR: Culture has less to do with the final look and more with the communication aspect of the design process but that truly depends on the client; this is not as straightforward. In advertising, speaking the language that is culturally relevant is necessary, especially the tone of voice and the way the media is represented. It looks different for everyone but since we're still very much a radio-and-jingle people, this is where that design aesthetic and culture is more present, in the language and how it is used. Visually a lot of our print and digital graphic ads still look like those in the U.S.; we riff off designs in the same industry as the client. A "B-mobile" ad in Trinidad looks the same as a "T-mobile" ad, with a dash of local essences in localising the language for radio and television. I've noticed over the years that is much more consideration for our culture. I think there has been a shift within the

design industry moving away from the copy-and-paste of foreign design aesthetics to utilising our culture.

As a brand designer, my clients know my established aesthetic. My work is within the realm of Caribbean fashion, hospitality and food, which makes it a lot easier for me to have a specific aesthetic. The Caribbean for me is approachability, ease, and colour palettes reflective of the tropical nature, fonts range from very simple or formal, and it's always sophisticated but oftentimes imperfect and hand-done, like handcrafted elements and illustration adding softness to the general aesthetic. No matter what I'm designing or who I'm designing for, everything starts with research. I need to understand the client, where they are coming from, and what they want to communicate; also the customer who I'm talking to, and where the space in this communication is being reflected.

CAD: Do you think Mas (carnival costume design) can be seen as visual communications/graphic design?

KS: Of course. Mirriam Webster defines graphic design as a noun: The art or profession of using design elements (such as typography and images) to convey information or create an effect and it can also be the product of this art. Let's say mas is a design element in this case. Does it convey a message or create an effect? Yes, mas can be considered graphic design since it works as a medium that communicates visually. But also mas is so much more too. Mas is also a verb – the extreme of art, performance and design.

Mas is one way that visual communication design manifests in Trinidad and Tobago we don't have a tradition of creating posters to communicate really. Carnival costume design is like calypso, both are integral for our carnival as means of storytelling and social commentary. Peter Minshall's work Mancrab and Washerwoman, Paradise Lost or even Tan Tan and Saga Boy, is a great example. He uses mas to tell our stories, in our voice, to us. That's visual communication right there – the audience always gets the message, because it was made for them to understand. Mas is performed once a year, but it's our avenue to experiment with visual communications. With it, we have limitless capacity and imagination to hone and refine our aesthetic and language.

On definitions and descriptions

It's a glaring realization that we do have an aesthetic, however, it is blurred by the unappreciation and underappreciated by its people which the education unfortunately supports. However, the work being done by artists and designers in their work uses this visual language as they interpret it. A happy coincidence is the visibility of this type of work counteracts the narrative that there is no aesthetic. In the following, we continue the conversation by considering what definitions and descriptions we hold for visual language and aesthetics. This is done through an interview with Christopher Cozier artist, writer and curator reflects with his former mentee, Marlon Griffith designer/artist working at the intersection of mas and traditional art on the inherent nature of Trinbagonian creativity and the reasons for its lack of classifications and categorizations.

Christopher Cozier

has been an art critic, educator, artist and the co-director of Alice Yard, a contemporary art space who lives and works in Trinidad and Tobago. Cozier's current work investigates how Caribbean historical and current experiences can inform his understandings of the wider contemporary world and influenced many discussions around decoloniality.



Marlon Griffith

started his artistic practice as a Carnival designer—a “mas man,” as Trinidadians would call him. His background growing up in the capital city and the heart of Carnival deeply shapes his work as a contemporary visual artist, fusing the performative, participatory, and ephemeral characteristics from Carnival. Griffith's work is based upon a reciprocal dialogue between 'Mas' (the artistic component of the Trinidad Carnival) and art as a means of investigating the phenomenological aspect of the embodied experience: it is situated at the intersection of the visual and public performance.



CAD: How would you describe our ways of making and creating, i.e designing?

Christopher Cozier (CC): Our inherent ways of design have always been functional first, and aesthetics as a secondary thought. We think through solutions without the demarcation of product design or social design in the same way we don't relegate our ways of visual storytelling to visual communications or any categories. When this embodied knowledge collides with 'formal' training, we are poised to show our interesting approach to design. First, there needs to be a separation of design from 'marketing and agency culture' for us to understand design's place in Trinidad and Tobago. Then we need to understand that we don't have a canon of art or design, not due to lack of work but that the foundation of work is built from someone else's idea of art and design, and that is not worth committing to.

What we have can become a point of reference that we can move forward with and from. For us, there is no hierarchy of criteria with painting as the peak of art, and craft and design on opposing ends like Europe or America. In the context of our experience with populations from Africa, India, China and coming in and mixing with the Indigenous Americans, within that constellation painting was never our priority. Our canon, to use loosely, begins at multifarious multimedia, cross-disciplinary position and Carnival brings it all together, opening up questions about the hierarchy of performance, art, and design. There is no distinction between art and design because it isn't relevant to our context.

CAD: What are your thoughts on the design education in Trinidad and Tobago?

CC: It depends on your definition of design education; here, education has occurred mostly informally but formally as well. In the 1960s and 1970s schools like John Donaldson Technical

Institute gave the working class person, like me – who did not have the privilege to do visual arts in high school but had the skills to become a designer – the opportunity to get into the field, without having to attend expensive art schools abroad. But many people at that time still didn't see the need for a designer to be formally educated, since you learn many things while working. When I taught at the school in the 1980s with the adoption of more technological approaches to design, we saw the push for more standardised tests to prove that you know how to design.

This theoretical training was a shift further away from the way in which it was intuitive for us to learn and create. Our society always had an apprenticeship based model and education was mostly informal. The design here has always been a communal activity, which required the luxury of time to develop the story and execute the design. In the months leading up to Carnival, mas camps were bustling pop-up design schools, where everyone was a student; experimenting and doing was the way we learnt about design. It was the way in which knowledge from masters of the craft of wire-bending, prototyping, illustration and engineering of costumes were passed down through the generations.

CAD: Marlon, did Carnival have a role in your design education?

Marlon Griffith (MG): Of course it did. I grew up in Belmont and was around Carnival all my life, watching the bands pass around the savannah, working at mas camps. Carnival is part of me. As an artist, mas is a key element in my work. Mas is the art of carnival, but it isn't considered art but an exoticised thing that the natives on the islands do annually. Mas is a medium that can't be controlled or confined to categories like art can be and unlike art, it can't really be on display, it's supposed to be performed – you "play ah mas". However, when seen through the lens of design, mas morphs into an object that can be shown in an installation imbued with whatever stories or meaning the designer wants to invoke. Removing the procession from mas gives it another visual translation, no longer something to be immersed in but something to be experienced as an observer.

Mas is more than just a visual aesthetic, there is a visual interplay of performance tied to the visual communication of the characters. To think about mas as visual communications, consider the development of traditional carnival characters; they were created in response to a situation. These characters present the story by performing and together with the costumes, provide the visual language. Carnival is an ephemeral thing, with months of preparation, experimentation and creation, hitting a high crescendo on the two days of street parades across the country. Ephemera is a crucial part of Trinbagonian culture, which is both good and bad. Good, because it forces you to immerse yourself in the present and in the process. Bad, because there's always a sense of impermanence and lack of documentation of the historical journey, which prevents the artform from growing.

A Call to All

For many designers in the majority world visual communication or graphic design is just a job where we are paid for being creative, but as exposed by this thesis, design can and has also been a way to express our lived experiences. By using our visual languages in our design practice we create messaging that is authentic to how we naturally communicate, rather than copy and pasting from the 'universal' design language. In Trinidad and Tobago, there is a void in design education because the introduction and use of local design aesthetic and visual language is not encouraged or discussed. If designers are not challenged within our education to explore our own visual language, how can we become effective

visual communicators? If we, the many, who have not felt accepted or reflected in the design canon find value and appreciate our ways of seeing and sensing the world it might become more difficult to reproduce violent structure within our design education. When we value our ways of designing and visual languages, we will no longer use it only as inspiration to be paraded out when beneficial. We are able to position our indigenous and ancestral ways of making and creating as part of our visual language that can be fully incorporated into how we design. Visual communication design beyond advertising is possible. Although at the beginning of this journey, I explored my visual aesthetic and language to understand how it can be used for advertising, I have since realised that it has always been possible beyond capitalism and it will always be, especially for we, the Many.

While some visual design languages have been simplified to fit neatly into the nature of advertising and might have even been created for the sole purpose of advertising, other design languages are more complex and layered because the promotion of goods and services wasn't the aim for creating. The visuals that were created held spiritual messages, told stories of victory, warned of conquest or held wisdom of proverbs and the visual language accommodated these stories. Like Trinidad and Tobago, some cultures have a visual aesthetic that aligns with their oral storytelling traditions. For we, the many, our stories are layered and filled with complexities, with various points of origins and a wide range of opportunities for the future as we continue to use technology to share these stories.

Understanding the history and visual culture of our countries for those in the majority world could help uncover something that we've ignored or tried to suppress because it was too different from the dominant narrative. Our visual languages and design aesthetics are different and that's the beauty of it. Like the languages we developed under the violence of colonisation, colonialism and imperialism – we add so much richness to something that was supposed to be universal because maybe, universality shouldn't exist.

I find solace in the irrefutable fact that we [the many] created before there was a vocabulary for what is called design and this exploration does not only represents how design might be described in Trinidad and Tobago or the Caribbean but it might be able to describe other maximal aesthetics that exist. We in the majority world have always been creative thinkers, generators of stories infused with ancestral wisdom and culture which others have been "inspired by" and may have diluted to create rules, elements and principles of design that we now ascribe to. In the words of Claudia Jones and Frantz Fanon:

A people's art is the genesis of their freedom - Claudia Jones

Come, then, comrades, the European game has finally ended; we must find something different. We today can do everything, so long as we do not imitate Europe, so long as we are not obsessed by the desire to catch up with Europe. (Fanon 2004, p. 236)

Decolonisation isn't an individual process only, but it can start with us. As designers, we can start the process of unlearning by enacting principles of decoloniality within our practices. I encourage you to embrace the wealth of ancestral knowledge and ways to express our creativity in our cultures, ways that might be indigenous to us and those that we have adapted. In using our own design languages we can find freedom to be ourselves. There is no need to hold on tightly to the ways to express creativity that have been imported from Europe, nor is there any need to fit into that way of creating. We can explore our ways by reaching into the past, sharing today and preserving for the future.

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The decolonial pluriverse

Pluriversal decoloniality

are not trends...

many of us live this daily

We have to continually question and unlearn the colonial ways that we have been taught to design and about design. Which many times tell us to exclude our culture and indigenous ways of creating and making in favor of universality and universal design languages.