

Research in Practice Essay

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Introduction

As an individual passionate about heritage and historical progression, I took this essay as an opportunity to curate and explore three terms that have strong relation to these factors. In this essay, I will be studying what it means to be 'free from constraints' and how impactful movements can be to influence positive change, understanding the importance of celebration and how the historical progression is practiced, which will then lead us into how society is influenced by culture and why being culturally aware is such an advantage.

Freedom: Emancipation, escape from inequality, impactful movements, and freedom of expression.

Freedom can have multiple meanings. We all hope for freedom; we read about it, celebrate the idea of it, advocate, and dream about it - but what does freedom mean to *you*? *"...the meaning of this term is so porous."* as it can vary from happiness, nature, and reality (Berlin, 1969). British philosopher and historian, Sir Isaiah Berlin, presented a lecture at *Oxford University* in 1958 where he implied that *"...The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others. [and] The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor."* We lack political liberty and freedom when goals are prevented or obstructed by human beings (Berlin, 1969). Emancipation and the end of slavery are strong examples of the term, freedom. Erica Armstrong Dunbar's book, *'A Fragile Freedom'*, documents how African Americans living in

Philadelphia from the 1800's were '*constantly faced with mounting inequalities*' and started transitioning the state to a leading example of black freedom as the first '*rehearsal for reconstruction*' encompassed the end of indentured servitude (Dunbar, 2008, p. 48). 'Free' African Americans could enjoy the early glimpse of freedom but were forced to walk a difficult path and had to live with the harsh reality of poverty, being unequal and suffering from White violence.



Fig.1 - Aaron Douglas: 'From Slavery Through Reconstruction' painted in 1934

Artist Aaron Douglas, born in 1899, had accomplished a widely acknowledged profile for being an influential visual artist of the *Harlem Renaissance* (Anderson, n.d.). After receiving his bachelor's degree of Fine Arts in 1922, Douglas was later recognised for his talent by influential figures in Harlem (Anderson, n.d.), and became one of the leading artists of the Harlem Renaissance movement (Takac, 2020). Douglas painted four murals for his panel series, titled; '*Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction*', which strongly represented Black history and experiences. His murals capture a '*visually trace(d) emergence*' (Takac, 2020) of Black America in such a captivating way and there are also links to the developing culture; Jazz music, and focus on the history of slavery, emancipation, and emergence of African traditions (Takac, 2020).

The abolition of discriminatory laws are other factors that influence historical freedom and progression. "*Protests are signals.*" (Tufekci, 2020), successful movements and protests are huge contributors that have the potential to drive and create change, but it sometimes takes decades for

these actions to have enough impact to influence change, as Tufekci (2020) states, *“...of course protests work, but usually not in the way and timeframe that many people think.”*. The Civil Rights Movement (CRM), was a United States organisation and mass protest movement that became prominent between the 1950s and late 1960s and was run by civil rights activist, Martin Luther King JR. The CRM had a huge impact on the lives and future of African Americans as the movement held significant protests and boycotts which eventually abolished discriminatory laws that prevented black people from voting, receiving the same value of education, and having equal rights.

“Social movements, whether focused on feminism, anti-capitalism, global justice or other issues, are at the centre of the struggles that have won many of the rights and liberties we now enjoy.”

(Catherine Flood, 2014). *The Disobedient Objects* exhibition hosted by the Victoria and Albert Museum was an exhibition showcasing the art and design produced by grassroots social movements. The museum curated exceptional objects of consumption and collections of posters and prints to showcase how strongly messages were brought across during protests and movements, through design. The disobedient objects featured in the exhibition rethink aesthetic value as *‘they may be simple by means, but they are rich in ends’* and have the effect described by Jack Halberstam as *‘the queer art of failure’* (Catherine Flood, 2014).

Despite the many ongoing movements to inspire change and laws passed to set equal rights, there is still great injustice and lack of freedom of expression that affects already marginalised minorities that face discrimination in currently developed and developing countries (INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, 2013). These groups face great struggle compared to their counterparts, as they’re often disregarded and *“...excluded from meaningful participation in society”* (INDEX ON CENSORSHIP, 2013). Sadly, the world is far from inclusion, freedom of expression and equality, however I believe future movements, organisations and civil rights leaders that successfully and effectively practice the demand for change can positively impact our future and justice systems over significant time, effort, and unity.

Celebration: The feeling, positive atmosphere, costumes, carnivals, traditions

'Celebration is historical' (Hatcher, 2009). We celebrate traditions, public holidays, history, life, and death every year. Could you imagine a life without celebration? *'Celebration is an ancient ritual'* (Hatcher, 2009) and whether good or bad, without celebrating our lives, events, and accomplishments, we would be tied to the status quo and life wouldn't be enjoyable. HRDQ Editor, Tim Hatcher (2009), stated that there wouldn't be notable markers or important dates to judge history if celebration didn't exist.

Celebrating special moments and life milestones can improve our physical health and significantly improve our mental health, it's a great opportunity to converse, share laughter and perceive less pain as a result, therefore *'we're happier when we connect with each other.'* (Alura learning, 2017). We often feel the need to have a reason to celebrate, however, celebration shouldn't be restricted to important dates and events. In Mike Robbins' (2010) perspective, *'...we think we have to have a "legitimate" reason to celebrate'*, however, there is so much that we can celebrate without setting fixed dates or a specific reason. Celebration doesn't have to be after-the fact *'...it's a way of being and can become a way of life if we choose to live that way.'* (Robbins, 2010). So why wait?

"The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is in life to celebrate." - Oprah Winfrey



Fig.2 – Notting Hill Carnival.

Communities all over the world celebrate culture, tradition, and history through events like the annual *Notting Hill Carnival* and the *Pride in London* festival. These events unite people while history, liberation, and culture are celebrated - *‘Nothing brings people together like festivals do’* (Zalmay, 2017). Festivals provide that sensational feeling that is needed after our happiness has been overshadowed by negativity and harsh challenges, as described by Zalmay (2017), *“Social interaction with our fellow beings not only bring happiness but helps us grow our capacity to learn languages, familiarise ourselves with cultures, inquire, think, play and work.”*.

Carnival is celebrated in over fifty countries (Copeland, 2021). The music, outstanding costume designs, dancing, food, and other festivities are all celebrated as an expression of freedom and emancipation. *“Carnival in the Trinidad and Tobago stemmed from Calypso music which was a genre born out of slavery.”*, which has fuelled, and evolved the modern-day carnival through the spirit of liberation (Copeland, 2021). Notting Hill carnival is an annual Caribbean festival event that has taken place in London since the year 1966 after Trinidadian political activist, Claudia Jones introduced the

idea of the *Notting Hill carnival* in response to the 1958 *Notting Hill Race Riots* (Bannerman, 2018).

African art and the mythology are key inspirations to the design of the costumes according to

Notting Hill costume designer: Sonya Dyer, she expressed that the research phase of any project is

what takes up the most time (Bannerman, 2018). In Trinidad's Caribbean carnival volunteerism is

vital and '*Masquerades work night after night*' (Caribbean Carnivals, 1991) constructing costumes as part of the community in preparation for the event.

Insight Media's documentary from 1991: *Caribbean Carnivals*, examined carnivals on every island in

the Caribbean, exploring unique forms of celebration and further emphasising the liberation of the

spirit. Attendees of the Trinidad Caribbean carnival described the carnival as the '*happiest festival on*

earth' and solely a part of their lives, nothing else (Caribbean Carnivals, 1991), emphasising how

important and meaningful celebrating culture is to the people.



Fig.3 – Pride in London's 2021 re-branded logo.

The *Pride in London* festival is described by the organisation's website as "*The UK's biggest, most*

diverse Pride [and] A home for every part of London's LGBT+ community". As the festival unites and

calls for visibility and equality for all members of the community, I wanted to focus on how the new branding, carried out by their internal design team and London-based studio; *Egg*, effectively adapts, and strongly supports inclusivity. Eiben O'Connor explained in an interview with *Design Week* that during the re-brand, more emphasis was put onto the concept of pride - *"It's what bonds us all – no matter where you are or where you're from"* (Wong, 2021). According to O'Conner, the exclamation mark refers to a wider pride movement. When studying footage and signs seen at protest marches, the design team noticed that the exclamation point was always present in various forms – this was adapted to the branding to show the symbol is always used as a way of shouting and making themselves known.

"Celebrations give us something to look forward to as well as to appreciate what we have" (Merle, 2015). Parties, festivals, and key moments have been a great source of our entertainment while bringing communities together (Zalmay, 2017) but we should consider celebrating our cultures, achievements, and lives more - as these hold such significant meaning either way. So, ask yourself what you've achieved this week, commemorate those moments with your friends and family and *throw a party!*

Culture: The impact of cultural factors on an environment, why being culturally aware is so advantageous, and how Graphic Design has been used to tackle cognitive bias.



Fig.4 'Nelson's Ship in a Bottle' sculpture by Yinka Shonibare (2010)

Cultural factors largely determine the way people live their lives in society, it affects the way a community reacts, grows, and respond to each other – therefore reflecting a community or nation (Painter, n.d.). Culture is not restricted to territories or countries. Although some scholars believe there are almost four thousand different cultures around the world, this number is significantly higher in reality (IsAccurate, 2021), but why is culture so important in our society?

As stated by The Grand Theatre Blackpool (2021), *“Culture is something that has been embedded in our lives for a number of past generations and it will continue to be for years to come.”*, the factors can provide stability, nurture and has the power to influence lives both positively and negatively.

“Being culturally aware enables us to communicate with people more effectively, beyond words and grammar, by understanding their culture.” (Maina, 2021). Cultures that don't embrace diversity and are not accepting of other cultures become 'ingrown', which therefore causes people who don't 'toe the cultural line' to be seen negatively (Painter, n.d.). Without cultural awareness, the willingness to

learn more and understand how differing cultures work in society, our interpersonal skills are kept undeveloped, we become ignorant and maintain our ‘...*harmful stereotypes and unconscious bias against communities and differing cultural factors*, [beliefs, and lifestyles]’ (Maina, 2021).

While on the topic of ignorance, I wanted to look at how visual communication is used to respond to cognitive bias. ‘*The power and potential of graphic design as a tool for positive change is undeniably strong.*’ (TEDGlobal 2017, 2017). Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim designer, Ghada Wali believes that graphic design can change the world. Wali (2021) expressed that her existence in the world forced her to defend herself for no reason, and that her religion, ethnicity, and cultural background “...form[s] a “dangerous” element in a patriarchal society afflicted with Islamophobia and by the obliteration of the Arab identity.”. Wali was determined to bring back the ‘glory’ and life of the Arabic language, and therefore questioned what her role as a Graphic Designer would be in reviving and celebrating the Arabic culture and language, and whether Graphic Design could change the stereotype of how the world sees Arabic people (Wali, 2021).



Fig.5 Ghada Wali's "Let's Play" book (2017)

Ghada Wali's project, *"Let's Play!"* is '*...a chance to change the world's perspective of Arabic and the Arabic language*' (Hunt, 2018), and focused on teaching the Arabic language with the use of *LEGO* to preserve Arabic identity through Graphic Design. *"With this book, I hope to save my nation's beautiful script."* (TEDGlobal 2017, 2017). Ghada Wali aims to publish her book, and have it translated into as many languages around the world so that learning becomes accessible globally in a fun and easy nature.

Culture is complicated, deep-rooted and most of the time it's unseen (Afzal, 2017). Like art and music, Graphic Design is influenced by cultural surroundings and differs all over the world.

Understanding and respecting culture and cultural diversity as a designer is critical as people's activities are highly influenced by their culture (Daevas, 2016). It is significantly important to learn as much as we can about other cultures, *'Culture is constructed by society'* (Reference, 2020) and the factors are formed through encompassing language, food, religion, music, and arts between a group of people. It is different all over the world. As we evolve and grow, it's inevitable that culture evolves with us.

Conclusion:

While exploring freedom, celebration, and culture, I was intrigued by how these factors impact the way we design and visually communicate with a nation.

Political movements and laws in favour of human rights continue to impact many generation's thoughts and perspectives, celebration has been a common way to look back at the past and freely express the progression with a like-minded community, and culture is a significantly powerful factor that can shape a community's beliefs and every aspect of living. These are all terms that have changed our future and how we live our lives every day, I found the topic of Culture the most stimulating and began to think about how culture has impacted art and design, and how our cultural differences all over the world are shown through the work of a Graphic Designer. Researching the

Notting Hill Carnival and how Caribbean culture and history is strongly represented through annual festival celebrations was very interesting, but I also wonder how these cultures are represented through the media, and how this is picked up by Graphic Designers. Despite my love and focus on appreciation of culture, I am also curious to explore issues related to culture, such as cultural appropriation, and how nonrecognition through appropriation can cause harm to cultural groups that are silenced and invisible in our mainstream society. This has led me to question how graphic design can address ignorance within our society, and what visual communication can do to change people's cognitive bias while encouraging cultural diversity and awareness.

Potential questions for dissertation:

1. How can Graphic Design be used for good?
2. Can Graphic Design encourage change amongst society?
3. How can Graphic Design encourage positive change and peace activism?
4. How have various cultural factors influenced Graphic Design?
5. What impact does 'culture' have on Visual Communication?
6. How does graphic design respond to cognitive bias and ignorance?
7. What can Graphic Design do to encourage positive change against prejudice?
8. How can Visual Communication be used to educate a society?
9. How is the aspect of 'freedom' expressed through design?
10. How can Visual Communication be used to express heritage and culture?
11. How can Visual Communication address ignorance within our society?
12. How has the aspect of culture influenced Graphic Designers over time?
13. How powerful is cultural awareness in the design industry?

Potential practices in response to the dissertation:

1. A poster campaign tackling harsh stereotypes
2. A book on the history of Caribbean carnivals
3. A video clip documenting how people express freedom through movement (or asking people what freedom means to them)
4. Branding identity for a future Caribbean carnival

Figures

Fig.1 - Aaron Douglas (1934) 'From Slavery Through Reconstruction'

Fig.2 – Notting Hill Carnival (2019)

Fig.3 – 'Pride in London' (2021) re-branded logo design

Fig.4 Yinka Shonibare (2010) 'Nelson's Ship in a Bottle' sculpture

Fig.5 Ghada Wali (2017) 'Let's Play' book

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