## Centering the document — Towards a critical studio pedagogy in graphic design

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## Abstract

As a designer and educator, I endeavor for this article to make an intervention in the way that graphic design is imagined, taught, discussed/ debated, and practiced. I believe that graphic design objects mediate forms of sociality in ways that are banal and largely underexamined. This article explores the implications of an historiography that narrates the entanglement of graphic design with the administration of the settlerstate and capitalist enterprise through the genre of *the document*. Broadly defined, the document serves as the substrate for archival ways of knowing that are imposed as a function of the ideological hegemony of statist governance and corporate bureaucracy. As an instrument of state and capital, the document circumscribes how the world is named, and impacts the way it is ordered. Recognizing this is a prerequisite for mounting a challenge to this condition. This assertion is meant to serve as the backdrop against which to speculate on a different kind of graphic design pedagogy, charged with the education of practitioners who imagine and create other forms of what the radical pedagogue Paulo Freire (author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) calls "naming the world." The intent of this article is to initiate an exploration of a framework for graphic design pedagogy charged with cultivating a student's capacity to experiment with and invent forms that might actualize critical and emancipatory modes of sociality.

## Introduction

Graphic design pedagogy is largely mired in the inertia of a commercial, client-oriented pedagogy. It tends to presuppose an educational telos towards graduating practitioners whose professional motivations and operations are framed by the concerns and priorities of commerce and mass communication. This paper explores an alternative to these presuppositions towards the articulation of a form of graphic design pedagogy and practice motivated by an emancipatory desire. This desire emerges from a recognition of graphic design's historical entanglement with colonialism and capitalism — as the medium of its ontoepistemological impositions — through the genre of the document. It is energized by the possibility of an emancipatory graphic design pedagogy being orientated towards the cultivation of other forms of knowledge production and transmission.

## Design imperatives

The canonical form factors engaged in the studio/classroom tend to range from things like typography, logos/corporate identity systems, brands, books, magazines, posters, websites, signage and wayfinding, advertisements and campaigns, and so on. Student assignments tend to be framed primarily by transmission of technical, formal knowledge cultivating literacy in, and adherence to the conventions of legibility and "good design."[1] Ethical/aesthetic concerns tend to be overcoded by language inherited from marketing, and generally adhere to a general mandate to create legible and accessible communication work for such entities as the "target audience." These tendencies are axiomatic of what I call the "design imperative to publicity."

A cursory examination of "Career Outlook" webpages from a variety of graphic design programs in North America give an impression of the discipline's conventional boundaries. Below, a few examples:

> "Graphic Design graduates leave RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] prepared to work in almost any field imaginable — from education to film, television, publishing, retail and more. Alumni follow a wide range of individual paths, including running their own design studios, working for large corporations, specializing in web and interactive media, and creating everything from package design to title sequences for film and television."[2]

> "You can pursue studio courses in areas of practice such as: Brand strategy, Editorial and publication design, Interactive communication, Motion graphics, Packaging design, Typeface design, Wayfinding and information systems"[3]

> "Faculty who are leaders in design professions connect MICA [Maryland Institute College of Art] students with outstanding opportunities for internships, freelance and career-launching jobs... Some companies who have hired MICA designers for jobs or internships include Abercrombie & Fitch, Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Google, Kate Spade, Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Museum of Modern Art, National Public Radio and Under Armour."[4]

> "Typical formats include branding and logo development, posters, books, package design, apps, websites, and interactive design. Students learn to articulate a critical and theoretical perspective and develop graphic design skills, such as type design and traditional letterpress. Strong craft and presentation skills are emphasized throughout. Students achieve the highest level of design excellence through critiques, reviews, and workshops. Recent employers include Apple, Anthropologie, LACMA, Guess, Metro, and Capitol Records."[5]

These examples map a domain of agency and intervention animated by the prospect of making a public impact through mass, networked media. Or at the very least, they promise an engaging career involving high-technology and working for national and international brands, prescribing student (and parent) aspirations before they even enter the classroom studio.

## Graphic design history

This tendency and educational trajectory is reinforced by the canonical history of graphic design. The design theorist Tony Fry casts design history as a form of "ontological design" (Fry, 2015). He argues that the production of a history invariably bears an agenda that narrows the discursive breadth and disciplinary imagination of practices like graphic design. In other words, the canonical history of graphic design, Fry argues, shapes the horizon of the disciplinary imaginary, and initiates the learner into a particular "...mode of being." (Fry, 2015) This is exemplified in the de facto accession of Phillip Meggs' *History of Graphic Design* as the primary textbook demarcating the boundaries of what it means to be a contemporary graphic designer and to do graphic design today.[6]

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1 One may often encounter this phrase in design education contexts and never know what exactly this means. Still, there might be resonance with what T.J. Watson Jr., former president of IBM is often quoted as having said in a 1966 memo: that "good design is good business." Its apocryphal status amongst designers is less an affirmation of business, and more an attempt at valorizing design by its proximity to finance and commerce.
2 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence.
3 OCADU (Ontario College of Art and Design University), Toronto.
4 MICA (Maryland Institute College of Art), Baltimore.
5 OTIS College of Art and Design, Los Angeles.
6 I would also note that from my own anecdotal survey of students in studio/classroom contexts, asking them why they chose to study graphic design, the answers often range from something to the effect of "I want to do art, but my parents want me to get a job," to "I want a career in advertising." So, even before one encounters the canonical history, or normative program descriptions, graphic design's disciplinary boundaries seem to be circumscribed by artifacts and desires endemic to commerce and the market.

Johanna Drucker critiques the Meggs book for adopting the narrative modality of art history and its concern with provenance, expressed as a concatenation of artifacts that are ordered and narrated primarily along the lines of a linear, teleological chronology. Transposed to graphic design as a techno-progressivist model of history, Meggs' narration "... works against analysis of ideological forces; it naturalizes sequence as a self-evident fact" (Drucker, 2009). Rather than seeing designers as political actors and design as a political and historical force in and of itself, this tendency suggests that these designers and the objects they create are outside of the social, political, economic, and ideological conditions of their being and making. Meggs' history figures a telos of design that departs from the indecipherable, local particularity of pictorial cave paintings towards the universalizing rationality of computation and the internet. In other words, it casts the activity of graphic designers primarily through a narrative lens of technological progress towards a universalizing standardization of the production, transmission, and literacy of communicative form. This of course fails to recognize the Western colonial inflection of this universalism, and in such a narrative, imperialism and global capitalism appear as inevitable. For instance, changes in the appearance of designed objects are inflected by new aesthetic habits of particular individuals, and appear as incidental markers that neatly illuminate a path to where we are today.

Drucker argues that by neglecting the co-dependence between the graphical object, technology, and the "circumstances of production and use" (Drucker, 2009), and by simply situating their historical appearance primarily within the flow of technological progress — Meggs denies the reader any equipment for discerning the political, economic, epistemological, and ontological consequentiality of the episodes and artifacts he describes. Drucker gives the example of his narration of the advent of moveable typography as applied in Gutenberg's printing press. She observes that while Meggs provides an informative description of techniques like punch-cutting, matrix casting, and the development of an alloy specifically designed to withstand repeated pressing, he:

> "...never suggests that the standardization and modularization that are part of letterpress technology imposes rationality on human production in a way that broke with the holistic guild approach and provided a model for attitudes towards knowledge production as well as labor. The fragmentation of processes into distinct parts that had to fit — literally in the case of letterpress is part of larger changes... [T]he printing press exemplifies the organizing principles for discourse formation in the larger social order. The rationalization of sight according to perspectival principles and the introduction of mapping systems to organize space according to a mathematical representation register related and equally striking shifts aligned with these organizing principles" (Drucker, 2009, p. 62).

The other ontological consequence of this techno-progressive parochialism, Drucker argues, is the figure of the ostensibly autonomous designer, freely making creative decisions independently from the conditions that constitute their subjectivity. She argues that for Meggs, "Designers are conceived as acted on, not complicit" (Drucker, 2009, p. 64). The heroic, primarily European male designer-protagonists of such a history manifest form and style simply as a matter of will, rather than as consequences of economic, political, technological, environmental, social forces (Drucker, 2009). The "capitalist realism" (Fisher, 2009) of graphic design pedagogy and practice comes to mind given that this is what most Anglophone graphic design students engage as the history of their chosen discipline.[7]

In his 1984 essay "The state of design history," Clive Dilnot (1984, p. 5) asks: "To what extent can history contribute to what design is and what a designer does?". To give this question some more facets through which to refract pedagogical questions, one asks: how might an alternative discursive formation (Foucault, 1972) — what alignment of concepts, precedents, tools and forms — supplied by an alternative historiography, equip another conception of graphic design pedagogy that breaks with its current individual-designer-serving-the-client and publicity oriented horizon? To respond to this, I propose a graphic design historiography that centers *the document*. The document has been largely neglected as a feature of graphic design pedagogy, and the disciplinary imagination of students and faculty.

I borrow from Drucker's review of Richard Hollis' book, simply titled *Graphic design: a concise history* which highlights the analytical framework he applies to his historical study, to serve as a model for what I will propose. Drucker brings to our attention that:

> "[H]is introductory remarks identify three roles for graphic design that distance his model from Meggs: (1) identification, (2) information and instruction and (3) presentation and promotion. This meta-language of the function of graphic design establishes his study as the analysis of actions... He grounds his study in the idea of design as functions a designer enacts within a system of social relations of production and reception" (Drucker, 2009, p. 66).

While I agree that this provides a more critical framework for the analysis of the discursive formation that comes to be known as graphic design, I would shed the neutrality of Hollis' terms and recast these with the following questions. (1) Who wants to know? (2) What do they want to manage? (3) What are they arguing?[8] In other words, this framework begs the question — what is the agenda of the design object? Applying a similar framework to the design of the document, the functions the designers enact may be: (1) arguing, (2) claiming, (3) remembering (as a function of giving form to knowledge and reifying information). This is to say that when it comes to the design of documents, the

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7 Meggs' book has been translated to Chinese, Hebrew, Japanese, Korean, and Spanish (Heller, 2004).
8 A question that Drucker, with her co-author Emily McVarish, prompts students to use as the primarily critical tool for reading their own textbook.

designer's questions are primarily concerned with how to render an inscription — which is inherently unstable and contestable — immutable against the entropy of movement through time and space, and against contestation. The latter is largely a question of how to establish knowledge, and depoliticize an argument, a claim, a memory. The terminology of this framework implies contestability and begs the question — who wants to know, and why?

Later in this article, I briefly explore what these functions might entail in practical terms. It should suffice for now that Hollis' retention of the designer as an individual creative agent is the position from which I intend to depart. I wish to focus for now on how the functions I adapted from Hollis' framework motivate the "designerly"[9] considerations and processes behind the manifestation of things like money, contracts, passports, tickets, receipts, tax forms, property deeds, common standards, etc. In other words, my aim is to destabilize the individual figure of the designer, and to expand the designer's spectrum of practical concerns.

In spite of its relative banality, I contend that the genre of the document is perhaps graphic design's most profoundly consequential. It includes the kinds of artifacts and inscriptions that make claims about and determine who can and can't traverse militarized border spaces (i.e. passports); they usually interpellate all people along the lines of a cisnormative gender binary (i.e. identification documents); they make one available to conscription, taxation, public education (i.e. evidentiary documents like reports and orders); they are the basis upon which legality and illegality are defined (i.e. legislative documents); they reinforce one's exclusive claim to a colonized piece of land (i.e. maps, property claims); and so on. Each of these functions are ultimately related to some force that can back the arguments, claims, and memories inscribed therein. Pointing to these suggests a broader scope of designerly concerns to include the systemic, operational and political dimensions of the kind of knowledge production and transmission that documents facilitate. It also prompts shifting the subjectivity and agency of the designer towards entities like state bureaucracies and multinational corporations, and away from what I call the "Dwiggins designer,"[10] who is rather cast as a technician within these. Such designing subjectivities have been illegible within a design history modeled on art history's affirmation of the individual genius and the singular masterpiece. In contrast, these shifts in historical approach frame a study of what I call the "design imperative to immutability" — an imperative endemic to the document.

If one follows Dilnot's and Fry's question as a postulation that history does indeed shape the theoretical, practical and pedagogical horizons of a discipline, then what are the implications of foregrounding the document as the central object of graphic design history? Before addressing this question, allow me to sketch an ontology of the document.

## The document

In this section, I would like to sketch out what I believe to be the aspects of the document salient to the question of an alternative graphic design pedagogy, and generating the basic framework of an expanded practice. My understanding is rooted primarily in scholarship produced under the banner of media studies, through the work of Lisa Gitelman, Johanna Drucker, and Jonathan Beller. I also draw from the work of performance studies scholar Diana Taylor and others to sharpen the edges of what the document is, by posing it against what it is not.

In her book *Paper knowledge: Toward a media history of documents*, the media historian Lisa Gitelman describes the document as having a dual purpose which she calls its "know/show function" (Gitelman, 2014). She explains that the document, on the one hand, is a knowledge producing artifact to the extent that it transports inscriptions and paratextual features — signals — that can be regarded as information within the bureaucratic system which the documents constitute by their very circulation and storage. For instance, a passport produces knowledge of a subject interpellated by the global system of nation states and their attendant border regimes and agents. It inscribes, and therefore produces: a name (rendered according to a standardized orthography); a date of birth (rendered in an informatic format, aligned with an established convention for marking time); a gender (usually according to one of two cisnormative categories); a nationality (a status which is itself tautologically produced by the very object of the passport), and perhaps other biometric information, which renders the individual body legible as a kind of signature — knowable and identifiable.

As a corollary, Gitelman explains that documents also perform an evidentiary function — they are designed to "show."[11] To continue with the example of the passport, it, like most documents, is primarily dormant, and usually presented only a moment of potential controversy, or to put it more blandly, to settle a claim. It produces and sediments attributes, like those mentioned above, that might otherwise be unknowable in any precise, stable way, but are made legible as such for the sake of the disciplinary gaze of the border agent. Furthermore, the passport, the border agent, and the database against which the border agent checks the passport thus appear in one view as co-constitutive elements that enable the passport to function. In other words, as a designed object, the passport (and its co-constituting system) works as a document to validate one's claim that they are who they (or who the state) says they are, and that they have the right to, or are prohibited from traversing this or that border space[12]. The armed border agent brings to

9"Designerly" is similar to the term "painterly" as an adjectival qualifier, suggesting that something is "of" a designer's praxis. I embrace the vagueness of the term because it destabilizes and opens what being "of" a designer can mean.

10 For decades, D.W. Dwiggins has been apocryphally attributed with coining the term "graphic design," to mark the design professional as an intellectual, managerial agent distinct from more blue-collar forms of design and communication labor like typesetting and printing. However, this has been refuted by Paul Shaw, who provides evidence for attributing the earliest use of the term to Frederick H. Meyer. Although it would be much more apt to style my characterization "Meyer designer," since he was a teacher of lettering and reproduction processes for commercial work, I keep "Dwiggins" simply for the alliteration (Shaw, 2020).

11 Etymologically, the word document is rooted in the Latin docere—to show, to teach, to cause to know.

this configuration a violent capacity to impose policy — primarily, one might say, the general policy of compelling people to be available to the imposition of policy through their legibility to the state and its bureaucracy. Gitelman describes such a scenario as a triangulation between the document, the modern individual and authority — the authority of the printed object, and the authority of the bureaucracy which valorizes it (Gitelman, 2014).

This is salient to the question of the design of documents because it supplies a framework for understanding the operational and political dimension of their status and function as design objects. To reiterate, documents don't exist and function as discrete objects divorced from any context. Rather, they are a constituent element of a bureaucratic system whose reductive, schematic gaze — its ontoepistemological imposition — often requires a violent capacity for the reinforcement of its claims. David Graeber charges this observation in his description of police officers as bureaucrats with guns (Graeber, 2015). This alignment of inscription, database, force, is also reminiscent of what Bruno Latour might refer to as the *alignment of allies* (Latour, 1986). I am partial to the use of these terms because alignment suggests a graphical dimension — think the reductive, instrumental rationalization of the world according to the graphical logic of the spreadsheet in order to enable its management and exploitation (Scott, 1998); and *allies* for the way it suggests the political (where there are allies, there are enemies, or alliances with the other's enemies). Indeed, this pedagogical project is partly motivated by a desire to study ways in which one might become an enemy to the current hegemonic state of knowing and remembering.

## *Information*

Johanna Drucker's study of graphical interfaces elaborates. In her book *Graphesis*, Drucker directs us to the basic, critical understanding that "most visualizations are acts of interpretation masquerading as presentation. In other words, they are images that act as if they are just showing us what is, but in actuality, they are *arguments* made in graphical form" (Drucker 2014, p. ix, my emphasis) Particularly significant to the question of the design of documents is her brief exposition on the graphical logic of Mesopotamean clay tablets.[13] It should first be noted that the inscriptions these carried were primarily records of transactions, financial, contracts/obligations, mediating relationships where some kind of economic value was at stake. The range of things to be expressed and known in early writing primarily includes concern for recording things like the quantities of commodities and time. In other words, the earliest known form of writing doesn't come into being for the sake of literary expression, or even religious devotion, but rather for the purposes of accounting (Hobart & Schiffman 1998) — inscribed obligations and records that were required to travel through space and time, but also against ambiguity and dispute, by virtue (primarily) of their ability to hold the integrity of their form and meaning.

12 See also Mahmoud Keshavarz's The design politics of the passport: Materiality, immobility, and dissent (2018).

Drucker calls our attention not only to the semantic value of these inscriptions, but also to their more precise valorization through a syntactic grid that structures the graphical space, providing a scaffolding of rows and columns, a coordinate system for ordering signs into categories, sequence/time, hierarchy, and enabling comparison, combination, calculation. She recalls Denise Schmandt-Besserat's observation that the grids commonly found on ancient documents (implicit or explicit) served an orthographic function, "...a point of reference against which the basic graphic properties of sequence, direction, orientation, size, and scale can register their significance" (Drucker, 2014). When the inscription that a document carries is implicated in a relationship that requires the kind of objective mediation that the document endeavors to supply[14], its correct interpretation is critical to its value as a document, and is helped by the establishment of conventions of writing and reading.[15] A focus on the role of the inscriptions that documents transmit as information will propel and illuminate an expanded conception of design.

Michael E. Hobart and Zachary Sayre Schiffman make a useful distinction between *information* and *commemoration* in order to sharpen our understanding of the relationship of the former to memory. They argue that information operates as abstraction and rhetorical universalization. As such it is distinct from commemoration (co-memory)[16] which is a matter of shared, embodied experience and knowledge — and by its somatic (cerebral), subjective storage, precludes the possibility of its status as stable information. Information, on the other hand, by the immutability of its form and substrate is that which is abstracted from experience and made combinable with other information in order to produce analysis and rational action.

13 I also wish to note that the technical aspect of these ancient inscriptions suggests that "typography" precedes any sort of manuscript as a form of writing. The tablets practically make a self-evident case for this — they are marked by pressing; the symbols are arranged according to an implicit grid; the morphology of the signs are thus standardized by virtue of a consistently reproducible action. This is of course a back projection made deliberately to align more modern, familiar instantiations of typography with political consequence. If the first "graphic designers" were people trying to mediate commercial and political relationships through documents, what could that mean for how graphic design is thought of today?

14 See David Graeber's Debt: The first 5,000 years. To paraphrase severely, Graeber upturns the conventional progressive narrative about the evolutionary transition from primitive barter to the advent of money as the basis of a society in contemporary credit-based economies develop. He argues instead that primitive economies operated on the principle of credit exchange: If we are neighbors in an ancient village, and you need something from me, then I can lend it to you with a reasonable expectation that I can ask something of you later. This kind of credit based exchange is evidently unmediated by a documentary object like a contract or money.

15 Further to the political dimension of typography and printing, see Benedict Anderson's Imagined communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism. Anderson casts the historian and the grammarian, through the technologies of moveable typography and printing, driven by bourgeois capitalist enterprise (what he calls print capitalism), as protagonists in the birth of nationalist struggles. Printing subordinated local habits and cultures of writing to a standard centralized around administrative print languages. The standardization of written vernacular languages, and their popularization through education, expand the audience and market for printed products.

"Yet writing did not spring forth fully formed as a technology of communication, much less one communicating speech. Its genius resides in the fact that it originated as something apart from both picture drawing *and* the spoken word, something absolutely new. At its inception, writing was neither more nor less than the very quintessence of information — the classificatory aspect of language abstracted from the flow of experience and rendered visible. The origin of writing therefore constitutes, at one and the same time, the first information technology and the birth of information itself" (Hobart & Schiffman 1998, p. 34).

Where Hobart and Schiffman tend to address information in somewhat neutral terms (i.e. that it comprises mental objects, abstracted from the "flow of experience''), Jonathan Beller puts a finer point to the political significance of this notion. In his book *The message is murder*, he argues that information cannot be divorced from the capitalist logic of the commodity form which, for instance, violently transposes "chicken lives to another domain" (Beller, 2017, p. 30). In other words, in its schematization of the world, information imposes claims that reduce life and worlds in ways that render its complex and plural ontologies into combinable and comparable units, available to the murderous rationality of managerial calculation. Information is not an ontologically neutral thing that is simply extracted from the world and presented as such. Instead, it is constituted and circumscribed by the managerial gaze which seeks it and acts, sometimes murderously, upon it. Beller's illustration may be a limit case that brings into our understanding the violence that can result from the reductive rationalization of life and worlds enabled by the document. Indeed, the document, and its inscriptions understood as information (as a claim, as evidence), constitutes a way of knowing and a way of transmitting that knowledge as an instrument of administration and command.

### The archive

As the performance studies scholar Diana Taylor helps us to understand, the document can be implicated as a substrate of coloniality and as an instrument of colonization. Taylor's counterposition of the archive and the repertoire are

illuminating. To paraphrase, the "archive" represents practices of knowledge production, storage, and transmission carried out through media that tend to fall within the domain of graphic design artifacts (again, things like passports, property deeds, treaties, etc.). Conversely, there is the repertoire, which entails modes of knowledge production and storage that tend to be rendered somatically, and transmitted through performance. Taylor uses the term "performatic" to describe forms of knowledge production, storage, and transmission — things like dance, song, recipes, rituals, etc. — forms and formats that can evade and do not necessarily require inscription, and which tend to be embodied and transmitted in the moment of performance. Although she is careful not to position these modalities of knowledge production and transmission as absolutely antagonistic to each other, the archival inscription — the document — is implicated in the apocalyptic colonization, that is, the negation of more "performatic" ways of knowing and being. One simply thinks of the colonial erasure, and the relative novelty (to the settler) of the name *Lenapehoking*, and its replacement with the name New York City, on documents ranging from tourist guides and property deeds, to drivers' licenses and popular films, graphic design history books, and so on (Lee, 2020).

If indeed a critical studio pedagogy in graphic design is desired, I propose the entanglement of design with colonial/ism/ity and capitalism, through the document, as the ground against which this might be figured. If it hasn't been too clear yet, my consideration of the document is motivated and charged by the politics of decolonization and anticapitalism.[18] If one can appreciate the extent to which the document, archival inscriptions and such can map — quite literally — to the colonial, this may serve as the other against which different kinds of pedagogical and practical questions may be posed. What I propose is that an antagonism to the colonial entails seeking ways to *remember otherwise* — to counter-claim, to destabilize the inevitability of colonial ways of knowing, as a different kind of task, orientation, mandate, purview, range of concerns for graphic design as a critical, creative discipline.

### Designerly explorations

I believe the foundation of this work lies with cultivating a practical understanding of what it means to design the archival, colonial document, in order to produce an analytical basis of a designerly antagonism. As such, I have undertaken an on-going creative research project called *Immutable* which seeks to chart the outlines of the design imperative to immutability. Its essential question is: "how does one design a document?" And in response, I explore, mimic, reflect on, and experiment with processes, techniques, materials that

16 For Hobart and Schiffman, commemoration ought to be understood more as the enactment of a polity's coherence, and as a primitive form of memory storage, passive until recalled at some point as information and evidence. The distinction they make between memory and commemoration also maps to the notions of immutability and mutability, as well as the archive and the repertoire (see Diana Taylor). In other words, something that is unstable cannot really serve as information—the "stuff we abstract from the flow of experience" (Hobart and Schiffman, 1998: p. 15) per se. In this sense, the mutability of a claim defies the logic of coloniality and its privileging of the archival inscription. Furthermore, they argue that the tokens and emblems of the earliest forms of writing (count and commodity)—the innovation of their combination (of noun and adjective, name and number) — figures the distinct caesura between writing proper and absolute orality.

17 Hobart and Schiffman's example of the storage of knot-tying as knowledge is embedded in the living practice of sailing, and thus has a lack of need for documentation. This is in contrast to the abstraction and objectification enabled by inscription, or by the maintenance of this knowledge by an autonomous class of professional knot-tiers.

18 "The great enemy of property is oblivion, since the loss of conscious mastery over time and succession leads inevitably to the breakdown of property. Thus the forces of oblivion are antagonistic to the self and property, while all the techniques of mnemonics are their essential allies" (Caffentzis 1989, pp. 53–54).

have figured historical documentary form factors — those genres of form which have themselves been designed to be historical.

The documentary objects I have explored in this experimental studio process are derived from a broad range of references, from cylinder seals and clay tablets inscribed with a cipher generated by a cryptographic hash algorithm, custom designed coins, and 3D-printed rulers, to photocopied editions of defunct currencies, to pdfs and photogrammetric scans. These narrate the colonial and capitalist document, and are organized and imbricated within four categories which represent techniques of immutability. I call these: "Clay," "Custom/Convention," "Coercion," and "Code."[19] I would not assert that these categories are definite, or even inarguable, nor are they necessarily progressively sequenced. Immutability, to be sure, is not absolute, either — there are always ways to undermine its techniques. Rather, these categories are prompts for generating reflection and speculating on an expanded notion of graphic design. To illustrate the conceptual tactics of the discursive objects I mentioned just above, I will share a brief exposition of a coin I designed and had minted. As a discursive design object, the intent of these is to index and embody each of the techniques of immutability I mention above.



Figure 1. Chris Lee, untitled, custom designed brass coins, edition of 5000, 2018.

"Clay" refers to the role of material in reinforcing the immutability of a document. Think coins minted in precious metals, monumental stone, and well, clay. Ancient Mesopotamian tablets may be overlooked as simply primitive, but clay (and stone) are unmatched as substrates in terms of longevity. Imagine that one wishes to establish a claim over a piece of farmland, and to extend that claim to one's future heirs. Inscribing this claim upon a clay tablet

19 "Clay" is a bit obtuse here compared to the other category headers. However, each maps to a mineral metaphor: "Custom/Convention" = mineral as standard; "Coercion" = mineral as weapon; "Code" = mineral as conduit.
20 Sometimes these objects are described simply as a ring and a scepter.

and baking it to set the inscription, perhaps sealing it in a clay envelope, would enable it to travel through space and time, and to resist the more immediate entropy and evanescent instability of the claim rendered aurally/orally. Furthermore, any attempt to alter the inscription would damage the substrate and indicate tampering, potentially invalidating the document.

The heads side of the coin makes reference to Hammurabi's Stele, the earliest known comprehensive legal code. The image is a replica of the image at the top of the stele. It depicts the King Hammurabi, receiving a rod and cord from the deity Shamash (the seated figure), god of the sun. The rod and cord passed from Shamash to Hammurabi represent surveyor's tools, authoritative standards for measurement and judgement. The inscription immediately underneath the picture reads: "Hammurabi, the king of righteousness, on whom Shamash has conferred right (or law) am I" (King 2008). The inscribed schedule of crimes and their appropriate penalties are thus rendered immutable in at least two senses — being authorized by a deity and not by the arbitrary will of a person, they are ostensibly beyond reproach and outside of politics, but also of course, protected by the stone substrate (black diorite) from the passage of thousands of years.

"Coercion," refers to techniques involving some kind of direct or indirect violence. It speaks to Gitelman's recognition of the entanglement of the document with authority and bureaucratic discipline, while being sharpened by Graeber's recognition of the violence this rests upon. Ivan Illich's (1980) recounting of the Spanish grammarian's advice to Queen Isabella, that the sword and the word (*armas y letras*) are consorts of empire is apt (p. 70).

The tails side of the coin reproduces an inscription found on some instances of early American paper money which was printed to help lubricate the local colonial economy. Printed paper money, being especially vulnerable to the kind of fraudulent and criminal printing that would undermine the note's validity (copying, and excessive printing, for instance), had to be protected in order to establish and maintain trust in the monetary system of the time. Since strictly graphical techniques themselves did not provide sufficient security, such inscriptions reinforced the triangulation of the relationship between the holder, the money itself, and the state, whose monopoly on the "legitimate" (legal) use of violence and power over life and death, is called upon to deter counterfeiters from taking the liberty to compromise the system of inscriptions (Hobbes 1651/2009).

"Custom/Convention" speaks to the process of standardization — the sedimentation of normative assumptions that enable sociality — for instance, the English language, the (French) metric system, Western musical notation, the Prime (Greenwich) Meridian, among others. Graphically speaking, it has much to do with forms made for the purposes of coordination — to register, measure, and compare the significance of marks made in relation to an infrastructural element (Krauss, 1979), like a measured coordinate grid, the staves of a musical score, the level equilibrium of scale, grammar. James C. Scott (1998) reminds us that standardization is a matter of conflict when

he observes that "Every act of measurement was an act marked by the play of power relations." (p. 27). When it comes to documents and the claims inscribed thereupon, the establishment of and adherence to custom and convention are a matter of (il) legibility, (il) legality, and (il) legitimacy.

The third surface, the reeded edge, is a skeuomorphic security feature that refers to instances of coinage that were pressed in precious metals. There was a fraudulent practice called "clipping" where the edges of coins would be shaven or clipped to retain the coin's "face value" while reducing its actual metal content in amounts indiscernible to the inattentive holder. The reeded edge establishes a normative condition where its appearance, intact, would assure the receiver of the coin that it had not been clipped, and that it was valid currency.

Of course, none of these techniques ever achieve the absolute immutability and depoliticization they seek. There are always ways to subvert, challenge, and invalidate documents and the bureaucratic systems they constitute — motives which can themselves constitute imperatives for design and can include forgery and perhaps even destruction as designerly actions. For my purposes here, however, these briefly described instantiations of technique (material, orthographic, ideological, technical, etc.) simply represent efforts to resolve vulnerabilities in earlier forms of making claims, recording information, and reinforcing the integrity of these. To be sure, my concern is not with the infallibility of this or that technique towards the discovery of the ultimate documental form (as a techno-progressive historiography might cast the trajectory of the discipline it prescribes), but rather to use these precedents as a starting point for theorizing an expanded scope of concerns in the designing of documents that ranges from the discrete object to the diffuse system, and to figure a field of contestation where what is at stake is the question of what is remembered, claimed, known, and how. Neither is my intent to explore the document by way of advocating for a design pedagogy and practice that reifies colonial forms of historiography. Rather, it is to map the limit against which to launch explorations of a practice concerned with giving form to the storage and transmission of other ways of knowing — of making and reinforcing claims that counter those that have been inherited in the course of the administration of a capitalist/colonial world system.[21] The ethos of the pedagogical project I am trying to describe is partly framed by a sentiment expressed by Gayatri Spivak, recalled by Emily Lordi, that: "[an] academic field [is] a field of vision. It's about who and what you train yourself to see, look for, and listen to. So the field is not an object or a terrain that one masters, but a mode of seeking in the world that one cultivates endlessly."[22]

## Conclusion

My project is oriented politically by the anthropologist Laura Nader's call to "study up" (on those in power: Nader, 1969) — to direct the scholarly and designerly gaze towards those in power — to cultivate a meaningful understanding of power as the problem against which creative and critical experimentation and exploration is mobilized. Paulo Freire's concept of "naming the world" helps to frame studying up as the search for productive limits from which graphic design might be imagined as a praxis engaged in the production of emergent, emancipatory form. For Freire, the capacity to name the world is poietic and transformative. I understand naming thus as an ontoepistomological making of the world. To be sure, this capacity to name the world is not the sole domain of a commanding elite to be imposed on those that are subordinated to them. Naming, Freire reminds us, can also be undertaken by the oppressed as a matter of being in dialogue (even with the oppressor). Freire's description of naming as a recursive, discursive, creative act — where each new name becomes a problem that calls for another new name — is understood as a motivator of the creative impulse and constitutive of what he calls "humanization" (the elimination between the oppressed and the oppressor of the oppression that dehumanizes both: Freire, 2018)

Naming, as part of the vocation of humanization, thus gives the word *design, designing, designation* a more critical, and potentially emancipatory charge — perhaps even as a form of epistemic disobedience against the "imperial languages" (Mignolo, 2009). To this end, I propose that the a new series of questions orienting graphic design pedagogy towards studying, exploring, creating and reinforcing, through new and different techniques of immutability, or against immutability, other ways of remembering, knowing and claiming. Could these questions explore and generate forms of sociality that preclude the kinds of documental artifacts that are endemic to managerial tendencies and colonial institutions? Could historiography be about designing history, as a creative, narrative praxis and does that involve new kinds of writing, transmission, storage, retrieval and performance? At what point does it stop being useful to retain design as a disciplinary framework? At what point must its institutional and professional horizons be abandoned to meaningfully explore these questions?

The conceit of centering the document (as shorthand for ways of knowing and remembering) in graphic design history is that it approaches design pedagogy and practice as an abolitionist one. It privileges an affirmation and amplification of existing non-oppressive, anti-hegemonic ways of knowing and being, but is also tasked with exploring and giving form to radically divergent ones.[23] The praxis of teaching and learning graphic design ought thus to be fundamentally rethought in a way that centers these concerns. We might start, at least in the design school, with the abolition of the reductive informatics of grading — documents that overcode, bureaucratize, and discipline the pedagogical space of the studio. A pedagogy resonant

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21 Again, Hobart and Schiffman's distinction between memory and commemoration implies that the colonial tendency is reflected in the abstraction, and critical reflection enabled by writing — objectification (in — form — ation) and stabilized knowledge is "captured," "seized," "grasped," "apprehended," "comprehended," "gotten," and so on. (p. 30)
22 @ejlordi (twitter)

23 Recognizing the different degrees of urgency, the abolitionist character of this pedagogy and practice is inspired by Ruth Wilson Gilmore's formulation of prison abolition.

with a decolonial politics and ethics ought to eschew such punitive disciplinarity and affirm other illegible, and necessarily unaccountable (to an hierarchical, managerial, disciplinary gaze), ways of knowing and being, teaching and learning. It demands a different kind of sensitivity to plurality and new kinds of literacy that exceed the grammar of profession, commerce, and publicity.

This is not to say that what graphic design education ought to affirm is the imperative to immutability. Rather, the naming of this imperative, as a matter of studying up, serves as a technique of unlearning the prison of convention and unthinking the borders of the hegemonic colonial languages (Mignolo, 2009). This is not meant as a matter of "learning the rules to break them," in the way that David Theo Goldberg observes that Marx advocates for the British colonial development of India in order to set it on the path of an immanent socialist revolution (to achieve decolonization, we must first accelerate colonization! – Goldberg, 2001). Rather, unlearning and unthinking are simply about positioning the ostensibly immutable document as a ground against which to figure something more emancipatory. Walter Mignolo provides a concept called "re-existing" (Mignolo, 2017) which, for my purposes, I understand as a name for a creative praxis that explores and actualizes other ways of remembering and articulates decolonial counter-claims while asserting the validity of other ways of knowing. The task for a graphic design pedagogy thus figured may be to think with students on how to "re-exist" and/or to generate anew that which has been suppressed by the coloniality of the document.

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