

LINE OF ENQUIRY

Can parents and children engage with colonial legacy in a positive way?

Time living abroad with my family made me look back towards “home”. Everywhere we went, traces of the British Empire appeared – road signs, currencies, civil systems, even a demilitarised zone. Both positive and negative effects were present. When my kids asked “why do the Egyptians have pounds like us?” and “where are the missing pieces of The Parthenon, Daddy?”, I began to see colonial legacy not as ancient history but something that shaping everyday our everyday lives.

The catalyst for this enquiry was the investigation of my identity documents including birth certificate and passport. Once I took them for granted, now I use iterative studio practice and research to shine light on my positions and reconsider the documents themselves.

Relevance to Graphic and Communication Design

From the ‘indisputable’ know-show power of documents (Gitelman, 2014) to having the “right” papers’ (Keshavarz, 2019), my research highlights how intrinsic documents are to identity, movement and equality. For some, these agents of power are routine; for others they determine existence. Designers can remediate to expose tensions between these extremes.

Signage systems, education, language, colonial legacy’s affects in the context of graphic communication design are as myriad as its social or economic legacies. But this post powerful of documents – the passport, is the one material colonial echo that perpetuates inequality on a global scale.

In *The Design Politics of the Passport*, Mahmoud Keshavarz presents forgery as a subversive act exposing how its supposed authenticity is a designed fiction, revealing political power and inequality embedded within. My practice continues to subvert its form, appropriating it to explore colonialism. As I delve deeper, my positions evolve and they tell me that redefining graphic design as research in my own mind can make a tangible difference to me personally. I hope it can invite others in the field to do the same.

Exploration: Media and Methods

I began by hacking letterpress, reversing the first material process of printing documents. Using film and animation, I augmented my birth certificate, layering it with an audio interview with my mother to connect personal and historical contexts.

Next, I deconstructed my expired passport, pulling it apart, reconstructing it with “lo-fi” methods. I responded to the most relevant theme this intervention highlighted, colonial legacy. I subverted my most recent expired passport, repaired it and hid a written message within it using heat transfers and stamping. The message introduced a period of time living outside the UK and the realizations I had as an individual and as a father.

My most recent iteration mimics a passport, using foiling and bespoke binding, it opens to an amplified, map-like story of colonial discovery designed for both parents and children.

Across these works, remediation of familiar documents becomes a way of seeing self, context and privilege anew.

Contribution

My enquiry examines my relationship with colonial legacy as a parent and designer, it explores my childrens’ positions too. At a moment of political politisation, with immigration at its epicentre, I use Graphic Communication Design to prompt others to reflect in the way I have. I am also beginning to explore how colonialism is represented in UK education, particularly in relation to design, as a potential space for further development and dialogue.

Impact on Design Practice

Subversion and amplification of our documents through design and publishing, can make us reconsider the form, function and effect of these powerful pieces of paper. By digging into them ourselves (Blauvelt, A., Maurer, L. Paulus, E., Puckey, J., Wouters, R., 2013), we as designers are reminded to question and remediate their role in our lives and those of others.

Further Questions

At the intersection of colonialism, family life and identity, my line of enquiry is deeply personal but also societal. Micro and macro. At first, it made me see personal positions that were hidden to me before. Through further research and consideration of audience, I am seeing beyond old assumptions. Those include privilege of movement, subliminal national superiority and the preconception of colonialism as an entirely negative phenomenon.

Ongoing research and making will raise new questions:

- What does it mean to be British in a time of polarised politics?

- Would my kids benefit from a deeper understanding of colonialism and how it is reflected in three everyday lives?
- Could other parents share similar realisations through this work?
- Can I encourage positions of understanding, responsibility and tolerance through a publication or performative engagement with a specific audience?

Next Steps

I plan to invite white British parents with school-age children, to interact with my publication — to open, read and respond to it. I will film their engagement and ask a consistent set of questions before drawing conclusions.

If my research proves that a publication can foster positive discussion of colonial legacy, will evaluate how children's publications currently address the topic. Building on this, I intend to create a series of travel-themed books for adults and children, encouraging families to reflect together on colonial privilege, identity and belonging.

Through these shared encounters, I hope graphic communication design can help reframe colonial legacy not as a guilty past, but as an ongoing story we can learn to engage with more openly — and positively.