

*His Britannic Majesty's*

*Secretary of State*

*Requests and requires in the*

*name of His Majesty*

*all those who it may concern*

*to allow the bearer to*

*find their hidden colonial past,*

*and be better people.*

*To pass freely*

*without let or hindrance,*

*to recieve such assistance and*

*protection as may be necessary.*

## *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 shaped 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. Travelling within the layers of the passport highlighted various positions from the visual prompts. Firstly, the gold foil Royal coat of arms on the front cover inscribed with ‘God and My Right’, the invitation on the inside front cover from ‘His Britannic Majesty’ asking the reader to ‘allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance’ both spoke of monarchy in elegant typography and framed in blue guilloché. The stamps within and associated carbon footprint of my travels spoke of environment and colonial legacies. The intricately illustrated pages of guilloché-style imagery sang of the white cliffs of Dover and an idealised version of Britain. By cutting and pasting, adding Letraset, stamping, reordering, I became intimate with this expired identity document, adding photographs of my children and texts that echoed the positions found. I reclaimed it to hold a set of newly found positions.

I responded to the most relevant theme this intervention highlighted, colonial legacy. I subverted another, 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. Therein, I looked at my current, valid passport which was issued post-Brexit. By comparison, it is sparse and formulaic in its design. Gone are the overly patriotic images of the countryside and famous past Brits, now replaced with repeating pages of a geometric frame all bound in an almost black cover. I wonder if a change in national consciousness this reflects.

My most recent iteration mimics a passport, using foiling and bespoke binding to hide an amplified, fold-out map-like story of colonial discovery designed for both parents and children to read and engage with together.

Across these works, remediation of familiar documents has become a way of seeing myself, my context and my privilege anew.

**“FOUR CENTURIES OF BEING TOLD THAT YOU ARE ‘SUPERIOR’ TO BROWN AND BLACK PEOPLE ‘LEAVE THEIR STAIN” Salman Rushdie**

## 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 polarisation, 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 and realise the exceptionalism I've been taught.

Through further research and consideration of audience, I am seeing beyond old assumptions. Those include privilege of movement, subliminal national superiority and by contrast, 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?
- How is colonialism reflected in the everyday lives of my kids and is there a way of creating soft connections alongside their learning? When asked, my daughter states that she does not know what the British Empire was, but she has also engaged with the triangular slave trade as a subject in her History lessons. With that in mind, can the UK school curriculum connect with learning elsewhere on colonialism and its effects?
- 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 test my publication, taking in a cross section of parents and their children initially, within my socio-economic group in the UK. Accompanying this, I will seek the professional context of a children's publisher who I work with, Chicken House books, also approach schoolteachers in my personal network. This will situate my practice practically and inform future decisions about broader testing with additional groups to ground the first. In initial interviews with parents, I will ask them to open, read and interact with 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, deeper evaluation how children's publications currently address the topic will be needed. 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.

## References

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## Typographic note

Firstly set in *English111 Vivace BT*, Caslon, and **Transport** which are rooted in colonialism and passport design, this text pivots to distinctly anti-colonial or global, open source typefaces to reflect the shift of colonial awareness and knowledge. Open source typeface **Tac One** embodies an anti-colonial design ethos and rejects Eurocentric typographic norms to center on African authorship and aesthetics. **Noto Sans** was designed to support every writing system on earth — resisting the Eurocentric norm of Latin-only design. It empowers languages marginalized under colonialism by giving them typographic parity.