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Good Nostalgia/ Bad Nostalgia

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ABSTRACT In "Good History/Bad History" (1991), Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, and Karrie Jacobs identified critical issues in graphic design history while denouncing imitations of modernist works. At the time, modernists and postmodernists fiercely debated historiography and historical reference, but designers in both camps dismissed nostalgia. In this rewriting of "Good History/Bad History," I use a historical argument to critique the persistence of canonical histories while drawing on critical theory and decolonial thought to argue that nostalgia can create space for historically marginalized actors. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs rightfully found fault with design history's exclusions as well as the indiscriminate copying of its forms, but they did not identify historical quotation as a strategy for rerouting narratives. By using their essay as the armature for mine, I attempt to create a palimpsest of thought that revisits their polemic with an examination of nostalgic impulses that continue to this day.

KEYWORDS: graphic design, design history, design criticism, nostalgia

It has been 30 years since Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, and Karrie Jacobs penned "Good History/Bad History" (Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs 1991).[1] The first iteration of this text was actually a speech presented by Kalman at a symposium called "Modernism and Eclecticism," held at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in 1990. According to Miller, it left some audience members "simmering" while others felt "left out in the cold" (114). After considerable editing, *Print* magazine published the speech the following year. The text opened with a series of disclaimers, in which the authors acknowledged a number of "highly debatable points" and "unqualified pronouncements." The 1990s were a decade of impassioned critiques or, as the authors put it, "devil-may-care glibness" (114). While previous generations strove to organize around a common grammar and theory, designers at the end of the twentieth century expanded the field through divergent philosophies and practices.

In this paper, I offer a rewriting of "Good History/Bad History" to critique the persistence of canonical histories and examine nostalgic impulses that continue to this day. By using this essay as the armature for mine, I attempt to create a palimpsest of thought that departs from notions of individual authorship and linear progress while demonstrating the critical potential of looking backwards. It is not necessary for readers to have read the original to engage with this article, and yet the references may enrich the text for those who are familiar. Additionally, I draw on historical critical theory from Walter Benjamin and recent decolonial scholarship from Arturo Escobar and Walter D. Mignolo to argue that nostalgic practices can create space for historically marginalized actors. Graphic design has broadened its reach since 1991, but its history remains similarly problematic. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs rightfully found fault with design history's exclusions as well as the indiscriminate copying of its forms, but they did not identify historical quotation as a strategy for rerouting narratives.

In the decades prior to "Good History/Bad History," graphic design had become a profession under a modernist orthodoxy. Design historians published glossy, oversized volumes to validate the young field. Philip Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design* (Meggs 1983 and Roger Remington and Barbara Hodik's *Nine Pioneers of American Graphic Design* (Remington and Hodik 1989) established a Eurocentric canon which would be further entrenched with Richard Hollis' *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (Hollis 1994). "Starchy little" academic journals (Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs 1991, 115) like *Design Issues* (1984) and *The Journal of Design History* (1988) added global and theoretical insights to the growing body of historical knowledge. The dominant design discourse idealized universalism, neutrality, timelessness, and good taste. Under the banner of modernism, designers made a utopian commitment to progress; but an increasing number of designers rejected this discourse. Rather

than subscribing to utopian visions, they acknowledged a world with imperfections. They frequently borrowed historical forms and embraced pluralism, irony, and fragmentation. They questioned notions of good taste and used linguistic and social theories to inform their practices. This was the influence of postmodernism.

Although it has older philosophical roots, postmodernism – specifically its subfields of poststructuralism and deconstruction – began to influence academic discourse in design in the 1970s. English translations of seminal texts such as Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (Barthes 1972), Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976), and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault 1979) contributed to what is now referred to as the "the cultural turn" (Jameson 1998). In humanities and social sciences, scholars came to see meaning as culturally based rather than produced by signs alone. In graphic design, formal features of postmodernism are evident as early as the 1960s in the referential practices of Tadanori Yokoo, Wolfgang Weingart, Milton Glaser, and Seymour Chwast. Institutionally, the first program to articulate an interest in postmodernism was the Cranbrook Academy of Art, then under the direction of Katherine McCoy. In 1978, Cranbrook graduate students designed a special issue of *Visible Language* based on French literary theory, but it was not until the early 1980s that poststructuralism entered more general discussion (Lupton and Miller 1994). The ideas began to catch on as Cranbrook alumni like Jeffrey Keedy (class of 1985) and Andrew Blauvelt (class of 1988) began teaching and publishing criticism. In the 1980s and 1990s, *Émigré* magazine helped buoy postmodern discourse in design to a global scale. Sheila Levrant de Bretteville's work in the 1970s also anticipated postmodern graphic design with a feminist criticality that emphasized open structures, reader input, and personal narratives (Lupton and de Bretteville 1993). In the same year that Kalman first presented "Good History/Bad History," de Bretteville became the director of graphic design studies at Yale, where modernism had had a stronghold since the late 1950s. Her appointment outraged some professors, like Paul Rand, who bemoaned the influence of "women's studies, black studies, gay studies, and the like" and "trends" like "deconstructivism, post structuralism, [and] new historicism [postmodernism]" (Rand 1992). Rand retired in a huff and convinced his colleague Armin Hofmann to do the same.

Postmodernism offered a radical departure from modernism. In *No More Rules*, Rick Poynor (2003, 12) noted that postmodernism cannot be understood without reference to modernism. In rejecting modernism, postmodern designers often quoted modernist works. This was a way of hijacking meaning using design's familiar forms. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs (118–20) dismissed this practice – which they dubbed "jive modernism" – as parasitic. They responded to the modernist/postmodernist binary with their own two-sided diagnosis: *good* and *bad* history. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs found nothing

wrong with studying history. Rather, they took issue with design historiography as well as the "strip-mining" of history for "ready-made style" (115). Design history, they argued, was shown rather than written and this encouraged designers to use it for stylistic inspiration. They admonished jive modernist designers for ignoring historical context, taking short-cuts to instant legitimacy, and invoking nostalgia (120). Among the works they criticized were: Paula Scher's 1986 Swatch advertisement, which was a copy of a 1934 Herbert Matter poster; Carin Goldberg's 1985 cover for *Ulysses*, which riffed on a 1928 lithograph by Paul Renner; and a 1990 ad for Teacher's Scotch, which imitated a 1931 poster by A.M. Cassandre. Seeing no conceptual purpose for these appropriations, Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs dismissed them as "cheap and dependable substitutes for a lack of ideas" (120). Jive modernism, they argued, was pessimistic in its favoring of the past. It missed the essential point of modernism: "its faith in the power of the present, and the potential of the future" (120).

Four years after "Good History/Bad History," *Émigré* published Jeffrey Keedy's essay "Zombie Modernism," in which he jabbed at critics who claimed there was "a good way and a bad way" to do "everything" (Keedy 1995, 17). Keedy pronounced modernism a dead ideology, the followers of which, unable to accept demise, haunted the living. What modernists framed as universalism, Keedy saw as hegemony. What they espoused as method, Keedy scorned as dogma. He noted that design was an "extremely effective tool" in spreading modernism from a "a few liberal thinkers," to a "conservative majority" (Keedy 1995, 17).

In modernist rhetoric, nostalgia was anathema to progress. Rand articulated modernism as "the absence of sentimentality and the absence of nostalgia" (quoted in Heller, Ballance, and Garland 1998, 7). Friedman (1990, 153) wrote: "I reject solutions that revert to excessive historicism and nostalgia [...] I see myself as a radical modernist, one who still believes in an idealism bound by a moral imperative." Yet postmodernists also wagged a finger at nostalgia. "It is precisely this fearful, and nostalgic 'hankering' for modernism that has retarded the intellectual growth of design theory and criticism, and hidden a deep seated conservatism," wrote Keedy (1995, n.p. [19]).

The nineties are now, officially, History. This gives us some distance, some perspective from the disputes of the time. Today, designers do not typically identify with one side of a modernist/postmodernist binary. Claims to "good" and "bad" come off as simplistic moral judgments. Yet a stigma for nostalgia persists. Jessica Helfand (2005) wrote that "Nostalgia has always been a bad word for designers [...] it smacks of a sort of been-there-done-that *ennui*." *Eye* magazine editor John Walters (2008) wrote: "History is vital, but nostalgia is death."

Is there something invariably wrong with nostalgia? Its Latin roots are *nostos* (home or homecoming) and *algia* (pain) which signify an emotional condition like homesickness. In the seventeenth century, nostalgia was a soldier's disease. It was a mental illness, the afflicted of which lost touch with the present in their severe pining for their mothers' kitchens (Boym 2002, 3–7). As industrial capitalism spread across the globe, nostalgia came to be understood not as a medical concern, but a cultural side effect intrinsic to modernity. Predicated on loss and displacement, nostalgia is often described as a guilty indulgence or a salve for a broken heart. "Well-executed historicism in design is nearly always seductive," wrote Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs. "Nostalgia is a safe bet; familiarity is infinitely comforting" (120); but might nostalgia be healthy at times, perhaps even smart?

In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym (2002, 41–55) identified two types of nostalgia. The first is *restorative nostalgia* and this can be, to keep with the theme, "bad nostalgia." The second is *reflective nostalgia*, which is often the good kind. More precisely, restorative nostalgia can be socially divisive and politically dangerous, while reflective nostalgia is more likely to be inclusive and may catalyze social change. Restorative nostalgia mythologizes history, in other words, while reflective nostalgia criticizes it. To be sure, restorative nostalgia does not recognize itself as nostalgia. Nostalgics of this ilk believe they are pursuing truth and working to restore tradition: they confuse memories, which are always shaped in the present, with heritage. Thus, restorative nostalgia finds a home in nationalist political revivals. It is an "anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols," wrote Boym. "It manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past" (Boym 2002, 41).

One example of restorative nostalgia can be seen in current debates about the Confederate flag. While some believe it to be an innocuous symbol of Southern American identity, others see the flag as a racist emblem. Of course, symbols change over time and accumulate meanings in relation to their cultural contexts. What is now recognized as the Confederate flag is largely a twentieth-century construction. According to the podcast *Uncivil*, there was never a single Confederate flag used during the American Civil War. Christy Coleman, CEO of the American Civil War Museum and a guest on *Uncivil*, cited 350 different Confederate flags in the museum's collection (Hitt 2017). The stars-and-bars design was originally the battle flag of the Army of Tennessee and, in square form, the Army of Northern Virginia. It was designed specifically for use in combat and its connotations were initially tied to warfare (Bonner 2002). In the postbellum period, it came to symbolize the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy. During World War II, homesick soldiers blazoned the battle flag in solidarity with white Southern peers. During the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow supporters used the flag to protest racial equality including the integration of public schools. The

Confederate flag, throughout its evolution, has been indexical of white supremacy, a symbol that sustains the myth of collective heritage while justifying white racial dominance. Restorative nostalgia thus privileges some narratives over others. Clive Dilnot (1984) observed that mythologies of history are created "by the reduction of its subject matter to an unproblematic, self-evident entity." Such mythologies run the danger of anticipating and legitimating oppressions in the present.

Reflective nostalgia, by contrast, "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time" (Boym 2002, 41). Reflective nostalgics, like some 1990s postmodernists, embrace modernity's contradictions. They respect pluralism and seek no singular truth. They interrogate history and explore the past for pathways to divergent futures. An ad campaign from DDB Group Düsseldorf for Stabilo highlighters (Figure 1) exemplifies reflective nostalgia. The structure in each ad is the same: a black-and-white photograph depicts a historic moment in which the main subject is white and male, a woman in the background is highlighted in yellow, and the caption illuminates her forgotten contribution to history. In one such ad, the image depicts President Woodrow Wilson delivering the opening pitch at a baseball game. His wife, partially obscured in the lower left, is highlighted. The caption reads "Edith Wilson. The First Lady who assumed her husband's presidential responsibilities after he was paralyzed by a stroke." Another ad features Katherine Johnson, the NASA mathematician who was responsible for the calculations that brought the Apollo 11 astronauts safely back to earth. Johnson was a Black woman and thus relegated to stand in the back of the room. Were it not for the stroke of yellow over her diminutive figure, she would be undetectable in the photograph of this momentous achievement. By redirecting the viewer's focus both visually and ideologically, the Stabilo campaign broadens the scope of historical reference while exposing the implicit bias in historical documentation. By pointing to marginalized narratives, the campaign works to reverse erasure. It offers a view of the past that critiques the present.

Boym's scholarship provides a critical dimension to nostalgia that Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs overlooked in the context of their writing. Although they connected nostalgia to jive modernism, some scholars do not. Elizabeth Guffey (2006, 8) positioned jive modernist works as *retro*, which she defined as "a kind of subversion in which the artistic and cultural vanguard began looking backwards in order to go forwards." For Guffey, retro was distinct from nostalgia in that the former prioritized irony over sentimentality. Jive modernist works were intended to be humorous while posing a challenge to unimaginative Madison Avenue advertising agencies. If the language of modernism was associated with sales, jive modernism made the link between modernism and capitalism more explicit (Guffey 2006, 145–7).

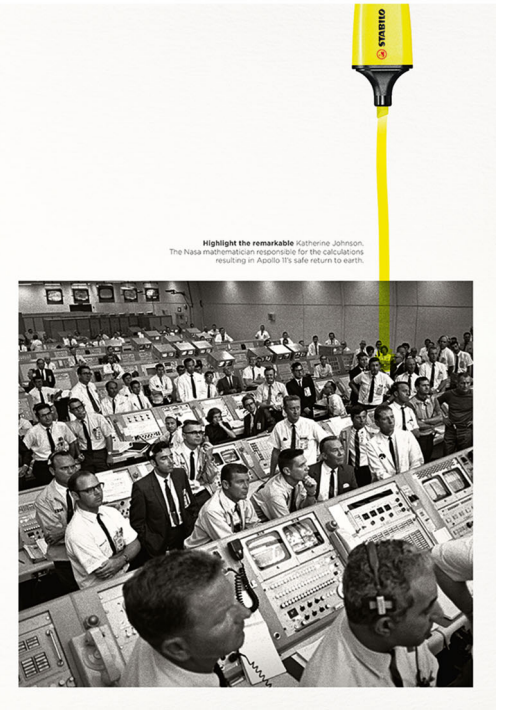
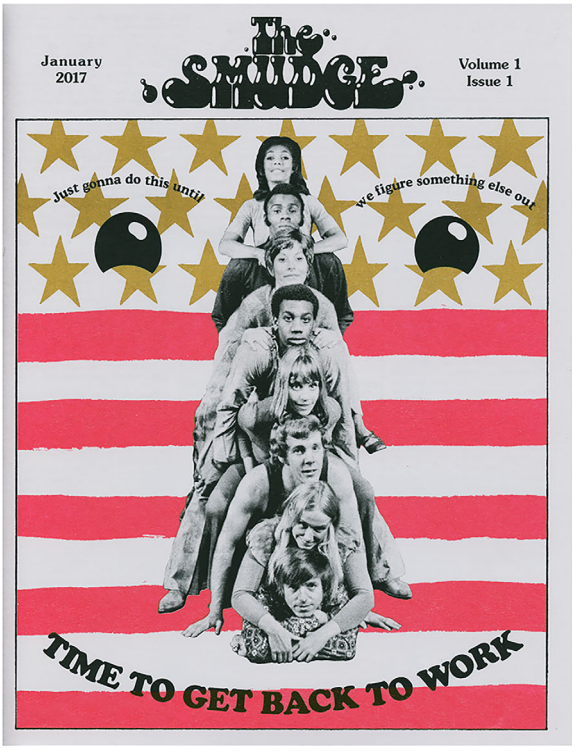


Figure 1
Two advertisements from the Stabilo campaign, "Highlight the Remarkable," designed by DDB Group Düsseldorf (2018). Images courtesy of DDB Group.

Figure 2
Field Notes designed by Aaron Draplin and Jim Coudal. Image courtesy of Aaron Draplin.

In contemporary practice, retro irony is often accompanied by sentimentalism. Aaron Draplin, for example, imbues his work with humor while romanticizing trade labor and modernist notions of craft (Draplin 2012). His popular Field Notes brand, a collaboration with Jim Coudal, is inspired by Draplin's own memo book collection and evinces his desire to "rescue" an artifact associated with blue-collar labor (Figure 2). Field Notes indulges in a mid-century industrial aesthetic, which is as sincere as it is comical, but it also seeks to revive a particular usage. Similarly, Clay Hickson's zine series *The Smudge* (Figure 3) light-heartedly parrots magazine trends from the sixties and seventies in a style that echoes Push Pin Studios. It ironically deploys a retro layout structure that co-exists with a nostalgia for print, or rather, printed ways of reading. Although Draplin and Hickson produce commodities in a manner that closely aligns with capitalist nostalgia, which will be discussed next, both Field Notes and *The Smudge* can also be seen as reflective. Because reflective nostalgia assumes that nothing in the past can be truly restored – only remembered, reimagined, or re-contextualized – it can manifest as a critical interest in prior ways of making, distributing, and using design.

While Boym grouped nostalgia into two categories, intellectual historian S.D. Chrostowska identified three types based on economic models: *capitalist nostalgia*, which "issues from an economy of representations simulating […] lost pasts"; *romantic nostalgia*, which differs in that "the past is experienced as irretrievable"; and *philosophical nostalgia* "makes the irretrievable past the precondition for insight" (Chrostowska 2010, 64). Of these three approaches, designers may be most familiar with capitalist nostalgia. Capitalist nostalgia suspends consumers in a state of unattainable desire. The goal is not time-travel – to actually go back – but to loiter in the space of longing. Consumption is the *pharmakon*, a simultaneous remedy/



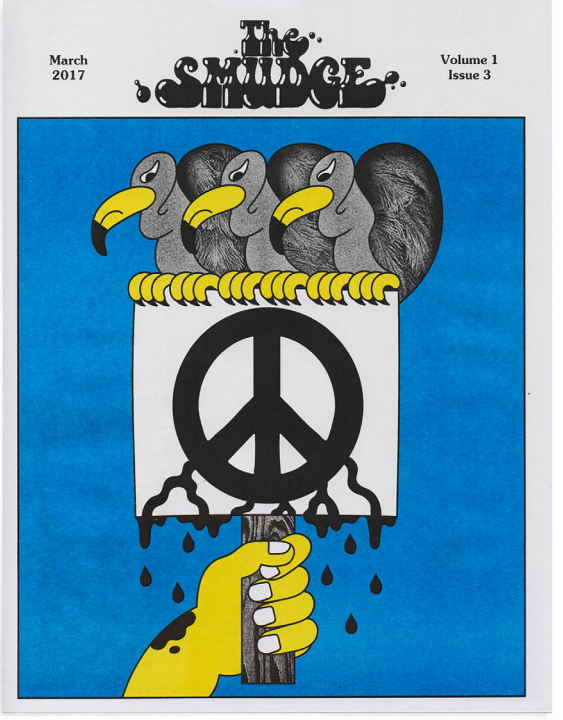


Figure 3
Covers for *The Smudge* designed by Clay Hickson (2017). Images courtesy of Clay Hickson.

poison. “Nostalgic fulfillment, no matter how elaborate, is by design provisional, since unfulfillment—the addiction behind addiction—becomes infinitely more desirable,” wrote Chrostowska (2010, 52). Designers, in cahoots with profit-driven clients, abuse capitalist nostalgia when they, like Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs’ jive modernists, use it as a shortcut to commercial success. Peddling nostalgia is a reliable strategy for seducing consumers to purchase simulations of their personal histories. The popularity of throwback products attests to this. Nostalgia for lost childhood – presumably a time of safety, security, and belonging – compels consumers to buy Lucky Charms in 1980s packaging and Underoos in adult sizes (Tselentis 2014).

Capitalist nostalgia uses the connotations of historical form as leverage in lifestyle marketing. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs objected to the use of ideas that “might have been radical 70 years ago but have since become legitimate—more than that, endearing and very, very safe” (122). Shepard Fairey’s 2009 “Want It” campaign for Saks Fifth Avenue sports a visual language derived from Russian Constructivism, specifically the work of Aleksandr Rodchenko. An ad for a slouchy bag reads, “Arm Yourself!” in imitation of socialist calls to action. Fairey’s fluency in this style, which was radical one hundred years ago, appeals to consumers who want to seem edgy, but are not likely involved in class struggle or political rebellion. Fairey often describes his work using a mixture of capitalist and anti-capitalist tropes. On his website, he declares that he has been “Manufacturing Quality Dissent Since 1989” (obeygiant.com [Accessed August 2020]). His “propaganda-style” – a synthesis of punk, twentieth-century avant-garde, and socialist liberation aesthetics – has been applied to projects as varied as his popular “Hope” poster, an unsolicited boon to the Obama presidential campaign in 2008, and US$120 sweatshirts under Fairey’s Obey label. His willingness to absorb the aesthetics of countercultural politics into capitalist logic plunges Fairey’s practice into the abyss of ethical undecidability. Nevertheless, the “Want It!” campaign transformed a distinctly socialist vocabulary into a corporate formula that detached style from the political ideas behind the source. In such a way, capitalist nostalgia allows consumers to project an anti-consumer lifestyle while paying high prices for fashion.

Chrostowska noted that capitalist nostalgia “affords us the means to ignore the radically unfamiliar and turn away from […] unclaimed futures,” while it also “costs us part of our ability to bear the weight of private memory” (Chrostowska 2010, 53–4). By contrast, romantic and philosophical nostalgias turn attentions toward the unclaimed: nostalgia’s “manipulative use of the past consists in excavating and multiplying potentiality obscured in the course of time” (Chrostowska 2010, 55–6). Like Boym’s reflective nostalgia, Chrostowska’s concepts of romantic and philosophical nostalgia extend from a will to survive despite suffering and a desire to explore memory’s ruins.

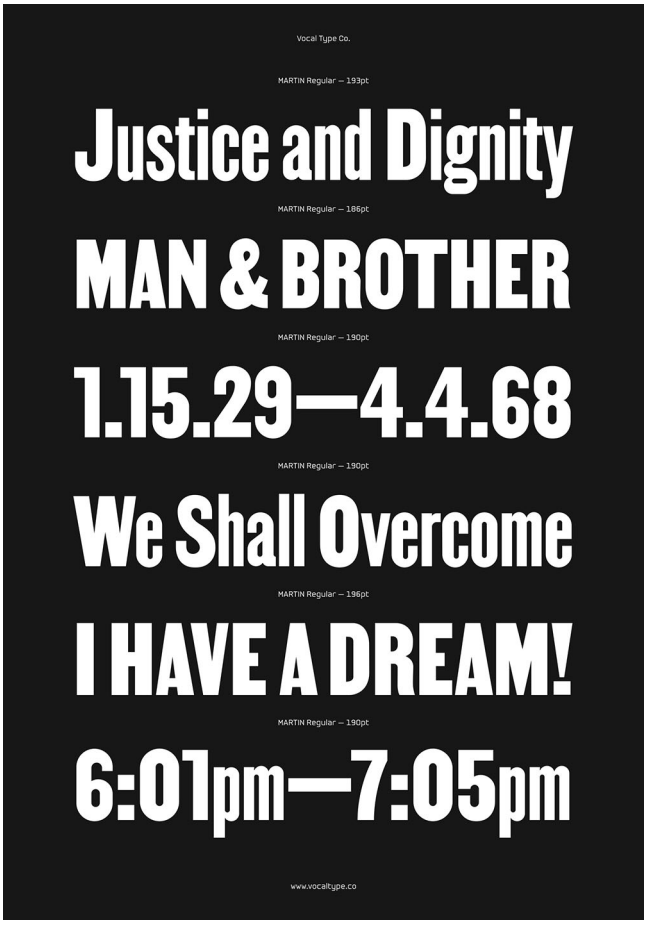


Figure 4
Specimen for the typeface Martin, designed by Tré Seals (2016). Image courtesy of Tré Seals.

Two examples of philosophical nostalgia refer to the same event: the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers strike. A pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement and one which coincided with the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, this protest was immortalized through the iconic "I Am a Man" placard. In 2016, Tré Seals recreated the wood type used to print this placard in his typeface Martin (Figure 4). Martin is part of Seals' larger initiative, Vocal Type, a foundry that creates continuity with diverse voices in the past by reviving pre-digital typefaces used in political demonstrations organized by BIPOC communities and women. Typefaces are not only forms, but tools. The use of Martin in projects like Isometric Studios' exhibition *Rising Together: The Black Experience with Police in America* (Figure 5) brings into present-day visual communication the traces of historical struggle. Seals' nostalgic project, by tracing the stories of real and marginalized people, offers up "the weight of private memory."

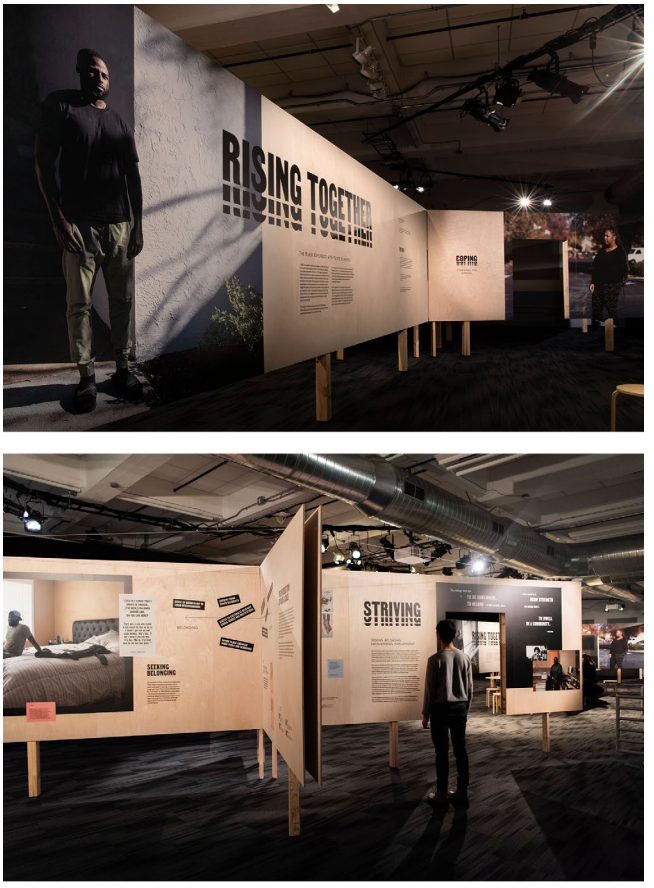


Figure 5
Rising Together: The Black Experience with Police in America exhibition designed by Isometric Studios, featuring the typeface Martin. Images courtesy of Isometric Studio.

Like Seals, designer and educator Derek Ham draws on this history for present-day insight. On the fiftieth anniversary of the strike, Ham published *I Am a Man* (2018; Figure 6), a virtual reality experience for the Oculus Rift. The viewer, embodied as a crewman, explores the past through a series of immersive scenes: a shift behind a garbage truck, for instance, or a march in downtown Memphis. Ham's vision was to create a reflective and respectful opportunity for viewers to have a more personal understanding of this history (Gaillot 2018). Both Seals' and Ham's projects are "excavations," as Chrostowska described, with "potentiality" toward the indefinite.

Nostalgia is not the same thing as history. It is an *affect* of history. Nostalgia is an emotional condition which is based on memory and may move people to act. History is a domain of evidence-based research. History, like the social sciences, seeks to be accurate and objective. Nostalgia is a subjective way of narrating the past.

Figure 6
Screen captures from *I Am a Man*, a virtual reality experience designed by Derek Ham (2018). Images courtesy of Derek Ham.

Fallan and Lees-Maffei argued that while objectivity in design history is the ideal, it is ultimately unachievable:

> We are trained to put aside subjective responses in our analyses, and yet personal interests, values, and experiences continue to inform the work of design historians from our choice of subject matter and theoretical frameworks to our methodological approaches and conclusions. (Fallan and Lees-Maffei 2015, 6).

Objectivity, a modernist virtue, has long been associated with the supposedly transcendent views of dominant culture, while subjective histories – the histories of racialized, gendered, and classed subjects – have been treated as special interests. "The belief in objectivity," as Robin DiAngelo (2011) observed, "coupled with positioning white people as outside of culture (and thus the norm for humanity) allows whites to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience." Subjectivity offers counternarratives that may connect design objects and ideas to a broader range of lived experiences. Subjectivity also acknowledges that all histories come from a point-of-view and are necessarily incomplete.

Historians use rigorous methods that validate their questions, situate their research in social and intellectual contexts, and guide decisions about which sources substantiate their claims. But many design histories were not written by historians. They were written by designers, the earliest of whom were motivated by elevating graphic design's professional status and distinguishing it from related fields. At the time of "Good History/Bad History," graphic design history was only narrowly explored. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs referred to three texts: Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design* (Meggs 1983), Remington and Hodik's *Nine Pioneers in American Graphic Design* (Remington and Hodik 1989), and Josef Müller-Brockmann's *A History of Visual Communication* (Müller-Brockmann 1971). Today there are many more texts, but Meggs' *History* is still considered the standard bearer.

Early graphic design historians charged themselves with legacy-building. Meggs (1983) wrote in the introduction to his first edition: "This chronicle [...] was written in the belief that if we understand the past, we will be better able to continue a cultural legacy of beautiful form and effective communication." Similarly, in the forward to *Nine Pioneers* (Remington and Hodik 1989), Massimo Vignelli wrote that the book addressed "the desire to find roots, the desire to have ancestors to whom we refer our ideas, the need to measure our intuitions against a larger history."

Writing contemporaneously with these texts, Dilnot (1984) cited two problems in design history which are still visible today. The first problem is that design history tends to gloss over the fact that design is not well defined. "It is not clear whether the term refers to a process (the act of designing), to the results of that activity (designed objects and images), or to a value," as in "good design," or "by design" (Dilnot 1984, 3). While many design histories read as artifact-based teleologies (design as an object, design as a value), fewer design histories discuss changes over time in design processes and ideas (design as an act). The second problem is that design histories have failed to capture design's relevance to society. For this reason, Dilnot objected to legacy-building histories: "[W]e can rapidly produce a canonical history of 'good design,' but we do not in the process produce a conscious understanding of 'design'" (Dilnot 1984, 4).

Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs described history as a selective lens that blocks out peripheral vision: "What we see is a narrow segment of design history: one period, one class of designers within that period. What we don't see is the context, both within the design profession and within real history" (115). Today's field is still attached to timelines of famous practitioners and prominent works. These create aesthetic hierarchies while de-emphasizing metrics of efficacy and impact. In legacy-building histories, graphic design appears unified and autonomous. In actuality, it is a motley array of translational practices connected to economic, ecological, cultural, and political

structures. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs criticized Meggs explicitly for writing a celebratory history that avoided design's dubious involvement with advertising, propaganda, and forced obsolescence. They questioned any approach to history that categorized design by likable stylistic features rather than analyses that related design to its social milieu, including its relationship to power. In Meggs' text, "even Ludwig Hohlwein's posters for the Nazis are neutralized by a lens that isolates only esthetic qualities" (Meggs 1983, 116).

Meggs (1991) disputed this accusation in a published retort. However, in his history, Meggs did downplay Hohlwein's political affiliations, making the designer seem passive. Meggs wrote that it seemed "almost inevitable" that Hohlwein's work would become attractive to Nazi propagandists because the evolution of his work coincided with Hitler's interests (quoted in Carter 2008, 175). Yet, Hohlwein was an ardent nationalist who joined the Nazis of his own volition and encouraged others to do the same (Heller 2008, 61). Meggs did not acknowledge Hohlwein's complicity in giving form to state power and maintaining a violent, white supremacist ideology. In seeking to validate a profession, early graphic design historians swept inconvenient histories like this under the rug, while also overlooking the contributions of women and working-class laborers, as well as BIPOC and non-Western designers.

Because the first edition of *A History of Graphic Design* was limited by the publisher to 300 pages and 600 images, Meggs claimed he had to narrow the scope and omit important global examples (Carter 2008, 223). Later editions, published both during Meggs' life and after his death (retitled *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* and edited by Alston Purvis), attempted to address the Eurocentrism with more inclusive examples. The methodology, however, remained steadfast to Western rationalism. Meggs described graphic design history as "a movement" in which more than one approach was desirable, but his own methodology presumed a totality. "The failure of a unified narrative is not that it is incomplete," Johanna Drucker argued, "but that it is based on an assumption that somewhere there is a whole pre-existing history to which it could be responsible" (Drucker 2009, 63). While Meggs supported histories from feminists and multiculturalists, he also, perhaps inadvertently, marginalized these approaches by describing them as "politically correct" histories. In a 1994 lecture delivered in Cholula, Mexico, Meggs cautioned an academic audience not to slight European contributions in an attempt to create balance: "Zealots –whether feminists, multiculturalists, animal rights activists, modernist (or Postmodernist) designers, etc.,—can become fascists if they lose their sense of balance and proportion in a drive to correct inequities or right past wrongs" (quoted in Carter 2008, 226).

There is no fulcrum upon which to properly balance history. Postmodern historical scholar Keith Jenkins observed that histories which make claims to "the center" of culture "are not there because

they are true or methodologically correct [...] but because they are aligned to the dominant discursive practices" (Jenkins 1998, 79). Dominant culture tends to view itself as default and exceptions to it are "special interests," but no group has more or less right to interpret the past than any other.

Since the publication of "Good History/Bad History," more contextualized graphic design histories have emerged, including overviews like Richard Hollis' *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (Hollis 1994), Paul Jobling and David Crowley's *Graphic Reproduction and Representation Since 1800* (Jobling and Crowley 1996), and Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish's *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* (Drucker and McVarish 2009). These built on Meggs' work by connecting design to shifting social and political conditions and by positioning the designer not as an autonomous cultural producer, but as a produced subject within cultural and economic systems (Drucker 2009). A host of additional essays, articles, exhibitions, and documentaries have expanded the discourse. Meredith Davis' *Graphic Design Theory* (Davis 2012) presented a history of ideas about graphic design. Helen Armstrong's *Graphic Design Theory* (Armstrong 2009) and Teal Triggs' *The Graphic Design Reader* (Triggs 2019) encouraged the study of design history through past critical writings. Briar Levit's documentary *Graphic Means* (Levit 2017) contextualized practice within changing technologies. Finally, a discernible effort to diversify and decolonize design history is growing in both industry and academia. Jerome Harris' traveling exhibition *As Not For*, featuring African American graphic designers, provides an example. Dori Tunstall, Ahmed Ansari, and the international platform Decolonizing Design each seek to delink design research, education, and practice from European centrality. There is a broader and deeper well from which to draw information about design history, but no one source can be a complete account.

Assumptions about history's absolute truthfulness may be connected to the suspicion paid to nostalgia. Marcos Piason Natali wrote: "It is only if history is understood as necessarily emancipatory, progressive, and rationally comprehensible that affect for the past can be immediately condemned as an irrational obstacle hindering the pursuit of social justice" (Natali 2004, 21). According to Drucker, designers should recognize that knowledge is partial and rooted in individual perception even when it is the result of time-tested methodologies:

> Graphic design history can shift its methods from claims to knowledge (positivist, objective, empirical) of static representations and towards knowing (probabilistic, inter-subjective, interpretative) as a dynamic process of thinking and analyzing. In that model, completeness becomes a stimulant, driving the reader to inquiry and research. (Drucker 2009, 72)

This embrace of subjectivity and incompleteness connects with decolonial thinker Arturo Escobar's (2018) critique of Western knowledge. Since Descartes, the rationalist tradition suggests that reality

is external to experience. In this paradigm, the past appears to be "out there," for a gifted mind to organize and narrate. A decolonial perspective posits that reality is constituted by experience (Escobar 2018, 92). There is no "out there" to be collected into an accurate "record" of the past. There are only ways of relating to the past through interpretation.

Walter Benjamin was presciently critical of objective histories. A German Jewish philosopher writing in the 1920s and 1930s, he committed suicide to escape Nazi capture. Benjamin conceived of the past as a single catastrophe, not a chain of events. He believed that history was a narrative written by victors. For Benjamin, progress is not possible so long as people are vanquished in its pursuit. His criticism was framed by a *redemptive nostalgia*: a longing to go back in order to take up the mantle of the conquered and begin a new trajectory toward a just future. He refused history's truthfulness and privileged the subjectivities of the oppressed. "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was.' It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger," wrote Benjamin (quoted in Löwy 2016, 42).

Modernist designers and design historians, who claimed to have had faith in the potential of the future, omitted entire cultures in their vision of progress. Decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo (2011, xviii) argued that the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality are two sides of the same coin. Decolonial thought advocates for multiple centers of knowledge. It upsets dominant discourse by enunciating epistemologies from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Indigenous communities worldwide. This often takes place through processes of reclamation in cultures that have maintained their traditions despite the pressure to assimilate. According to Mignolo, "dewesternization and decoloniality are processes in which the distinctive features of a (formerly subjugated) culture remain in the memories of colonial subjects" (Mignolo 2011, 45).

Sadie Red Wing's master's thesis (Figure 7) at NC State encouraged visual sovereignty through a Lakota graphic lexicon. In representations of Native American cultures, she implored designers to use traditional symbolism, rather than pan-Indian stereotypes (Red Wing 2016). While Red Wing's practice neither indulges in the sentimental aspects of nostalgia nor advocates for cultural appropriation, she looks back to a pre-Western time in search of self-representation. Red Wing rejects the modernist and colonial underpinnings of graphic design history which have discouraged cultural ornamentation in favor of a "universal" language. By creating space for Indigenous voices and returning to Lakota roots, Red Wing demonstrates a form of redemptive criticism that parallels Benjamin's nostalgia and Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience.

Ziddi Msangi's studio-based research on the East African *kanga* offers another example of redemptive nostalgia. Originating in Kiswahili-speaking countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and

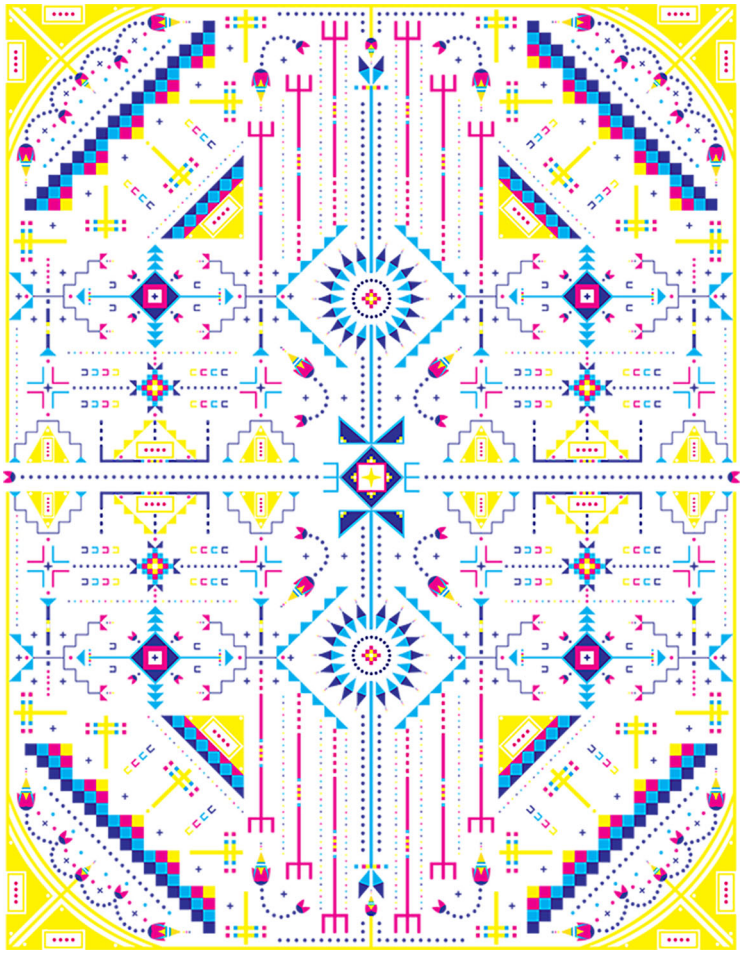


Figure 7
Lakota visual language, designed by Red Wing (2016). Image courtesy of Sadie Red Wing.

Zanzibar, *kanga* are colorful, multi-use textiles featuring a border (*pindo*), a central image (*mji*), and a short text (*jina*) which is often a proverb or local aphorism. Typically worn by women in patriarchal communities, traditional *kanga* sometimes communicated ideas that would not have been socially acceptable for women to say aloud (Andersen 2018). *Kanga* were used to carry coded messages during the Tanzanian liberation struggle (Andersen 2018) and are still used for political campaigning. Msangi recalled that, in design school, his professors discouraged him from incorporating *kanga* into his practice even though it was a feature of his upbringing (Andersen 2018). Now, as a professor himself, Msangi designs contemporary *kanga* that combine personal narratives with political history. In *Mwili ni maburudisho tu kama mtu hajui mtu* ("The body is just a distraction if one doesn't know the person"; Figure 8), Msangi interrogates his

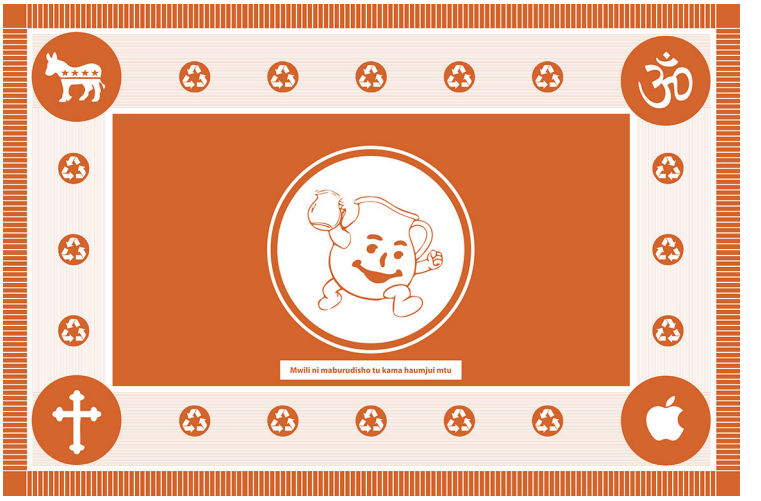


Figure 8
Mwili ni maburudisho tu kama mtu hajui mtu ("The body is just a distraction if one doesn't know the person") *kanga* designed by Ziddi Msangi (2011). Image courtesy of Ziddi Msangi.

Figure 9
Ushirikiano wangu atakuja kwa bei ("My cooperation will come at a price") *kanga* designed by Ziddi Msangi (2012). Image courtesy of Ziddi Msangi.

own attraction to the status symbols of multinational brands. *Ushirikiano wangu atakuja kwa bei* ("My cooperation will come at a price") is one of several *kanga* exploring themes of colonialism and revolution (Figure 9). "For me," Msangi (2015) wrote, "remembering and reforming have become somewhat sacred acts predicated upon the understanding that with our considered evaluation of the past

and those whose stories we rely upon, we are participating in a continuing ritual of recovery and interpretation."

When "Good History/Bad History" was published, designers were newly enamored of vernacular form. Charles Anderson, Art Chantry, and Tibor Kalman made their careers by lifting graphics from unnamed amateurs and commercial artists. In a published debate with Joe Duffy, Kalman admitted that, while he would not hire an amateur to work at his studio, he was comfortable appropriating their processes (Kenedi 2011). In "Good History/Bad History," Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs unapologetically offered Kalman's own album cover design for Jerry Harrison's *The Red and the Black* as an example of jive modernism, but never explained the inconsistency between Kalman's practice and his criticism. Instead Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs wrote that graphic design is the use of "words and images on more or less everything, more or less everywhere" (116). If this true, then borrowing from the canon should be no more egregious than borrowing from an unknown laborer. In matters of imitation, the relative fame of the referent does not determine the validity of the quotation. Professionals who poach the work of non-professionals engage in a theft that is potentially as uncritical as any jive modernist work, but with the added element of being insensitive to class and sometimes race.

McCarthy (2015) observed how the vernacular intersects with vintage forms of racism by raising the example of Charles Anderson's *CSA Line Art Archive* (Anderson 1995), a compendium of mid-century stock illustration that included offensive caricatures of Indigenous people, among other stereotypes. Heller wrote that neither Anderson's (1997, 230–2), Chantry's (1997, 233–5), nor Kalman's (1997, 175–6) "vernacularisms" were nostalgic, in the wistful sense, because they synthesized found graphics into their own unique styles. This championing of designer genius shows how historians can overlook the ways that vernacular appropriation has exploited invisible labor and perpetuated representations of white supremacy.

Nostalgia can undermine dominant narratives by frustrating the linearity of history. Nostalgia suggests a rhizomatic view of time, to borrow a term from Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 3–25), in which outgrowths of possibility depart from a singular narrative. Nostalgia may serve as a "line of flight," which Fournier interpreted as the "infinitesimal possibility of escape [...] the elusive moment when change happens [...] when a threshold between two paradigms is crossed" (Fournier 2014, 121). Dilnot (2009, 378) further proposed that the "territory" – another term used by Deleuze and Guattari, of design – "its possibility, the range of its capacities—always exceeds its actualization." For Dilnot, the territory "is not one thing but at least three things: it is what was and is actualized [...] what could have been actualized but was not [...] and what remains to be actualized." Critical forms of nostalgia revisit what was never

actualized as a way of enacting what could be actualized. This moves graphic design history away from legacy-building narratives and toward, as Dilnot (2009) suggested, histories that inspire wonder.

Wonder is not usually discussed in matters of history. Many people think that the purpose of learning history is to avoid repeating its lessons. According to historian Sarah Maza (2017 7–8), "[H]istory's ethical value does not reside in neatly packaged 'lessons' from the past but in the mind-expanding experience of sorting out complex questions within settings very different from our own." History is most useful when we recognize the past's *difference*. Rather than reaching agreements about "what happened," historians should *argue* as a way to reflect on the present (Maza 2017, 9). "[T]he practice of history itself and the questions historians ask are transformed and renewed every time a new set of actors lays claim to its past," wrote Maza (2017, 44).

The authors of "Good History/Bad History" challenged the fetishizing of history through uncritical imitation. They wrote that good historicism is "an investigation of the strategies, procedures, methods, routes, theories, schemes, and modes through which people have worked creatively" (122). For them, the key to making an eloquent reference was *re-contextualization* rather than *de-contextualization* (122). I add to this that responsible references also investigate subjectivity, intent, and impact. When designers separate formal styles from their social contexts, they may forget how aesthetics lent legitimacy to slaveholders, colonizers, and fascists. When readers encounter a single history that puts forward a supposedly objective and comprehensive narrative, they may not realize how this advances dominant perspectives at the expense of pluralistic worlds.

Despite having access to a larger scope of design history resources, it is perhaps more tempting than ever to knock off precedents. "Think about how much graphic design relies on quotation," wrote Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs. "One person mines, and everyone else swipes" (118). Three decades ago, the term "swipe" was fortuitous. Graphic design history now contends with a Tinder world. Many people access historical graphics through brief and fleeting impressions. Social media feeds promote the quick consumption of imagery, not engagement with ideas. If Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs (1991, 115) complained about "volumes and volumes of historical stuff with no historical context," today there is an endless scroll.

Graphic design is a language shared with audiences, but professionals have the opportunity to develop deeper knowledge of its potential. Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs wrote, "If modernism was a heartfelt attempt at using design to change the world, it succeeded. And it failed" (120). Post-digital graphics are so standardized that anyone with a certain app or template can fashion competent, readable design that echoes modernist tropes. In this way, the aesthetic aspects of modernism carried forward successfully, as Kalman,

Miller, and Jacobs predicted; but, in their view: "Modernism failed because the spirit of it, the optimism, was lost. Modernism without the spirit is Trump Tower" (121). Trump, as a brand and now as a former US President, deploys a dangerous form of nostalgia. The slogan of his presidency, "Make America Great Again," was a call for restoration. However, the issue was not negativity. The error was in the privileging of a singular narrative while erasing others. America was never so great for the oppressed. Trump's nostalgia expressed a political mission aimed at undoing important social gains, not moving the country into an innovative future. "Good," or rather, critical nostalgia need not be optimistic. Confronting history's slain and silenced is a necessary stage in a process of redemption. It was the failure of early design historians to leave design's complicity with past cruelties unacknowledged. The mandate of continual optimism has prevented designers from engaging pluralistic truths that might make design relevant to present and future societies.

This essay has nothing to do with whether historical reference is good or bad. Built on the bones of "Good History/Bad History," it is itself a reference to history. It is my hope that readers who are familiar with the original essay find my reading of "Good History/Bad History" to be a bridge between the debates of the early field and similar issues today. For the unfamiliar, I hope I have shown, through both the form and content of this article, that new knowledge can consciously build on the past. Rather than dismissing nostalgia wholesale, as so much of design discourse has done, this article defines types of nostalgia, provides examples of it in practice, and examines its consequences.

To review, bad nostalgia is often restorative. It divides communities under ideological symbols. It fuels nationalistic agendas that marginalize people. Bad nostalgia suspends consumers in a state of unattainable desire and puts a price tag on simulations of personal histories. Bad nostalgia does not engage the complexities of the past and it turns away from unclaimed futures. It simplifies and mythologizes the past into a mission to restore "the good old days."

Good nostalgia acknowledges that "the good old days" never existed. Good nostalgia interrogates history. It looks back to find ways forward. It presents the possibility that design can approach progress from multiple temporal directions. It disturbs modernity and paradigms of power. If bad history "offers an alternative to having ideas" (Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs 1991, 123), then bad nostalgia reinforces white-settler-colonial control of legitimate knowledge. If good history "acts as a catalyst for our own ideas," then good nostalgia inspires social change. If good history says "this is how designers thought about their work," then good nostalgia uncovers lost narratives that reveal new knowledge about who those designers were and what they thought about. Good nostalgia shows that many kinds of people create many kinds of cultures and all of it has a place in design.

Notes

1. Because I quote from the text extensively throughout this article, I will subsequently cite Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs (1991) with page numbers unless the context is otherwise unclear.

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