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Why does the visual representation of dialect matter in an increasingly globalised design culture?

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ABSTRACT

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This report critically examines the cultural and significance of dialect within modern design, with a notable view into the clarity, neutrality and standardisation of the current globalised design culture. It positions dialect as a form of identity, place and community that asks what is lost when regional voices become excluded from the visual communication. The report argues that the design systems that have been shaped by modernist ideals continue to marginalise dialects through modernist typographic conventions in order to suppress linguistic difference.

Through reflective practice, design analysis and critical theory, the research within this report explores how typography can move beyond its base function of legibility to convey a cultural voice and show lived experiences. By drawing on the works of notable designers David Carson and Neville Brody as well as exploring phonetic and sonic typography projects, the report highlights how expressive forms of visual language can provide a counterpoint to homogenised communication. The case studies within this report include literature and cinema references. This includes examples such as Kes, and the literature works of Millie Johnson. These studies help to reinforce the argument for dialect being a cultural asset that is desperate for more visual representation.

One of the focal points within this report is the Barnsley dialect. This has been referenced as a personal connection as well as a political case study. This allows the report to make wider claims for the importance of regional expression within modern design. It concludes by stating that representing dialect is not a gesture to keep communities happy, it is a necessary act of cultural recognition and resistance. In doing so, it calls for designers to challenge design norms and to embrace typography as a tool for inclusion, identity and voice.

ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

The visual representation of dialect is often forgotten or overlooked within the field of graphic design; however, it holds deep cultural significance within the modern age of an increasingly globalised design culture. The modern-day design culture is all about the almighty 'trend' which favours clarity, consistency and brand awareness. This in

turn causes regional voices and local to inevitably be pushed aside. This report begins with a personal question: Why does dialect matter within communication and what will the world look like when the sound, visuals and personality of dialect seizes to exist within future design cultures?

Throughout the whole of this project, I aim to create a response to the question: **why does the visual representation of dialect matter in an increasingly globalised design culture?** This question allows for wider discussions to occur regarding identity, language and power within the graphic design industry. It challenges the idea that a 'good' design must always remain neutral, efficient and universally legible to a given audience. Instead, it invokes the themes of expression and asks the question of what happens when expression is repressed by the values of a 'good' design and what it means to priorities visibility for local and marginalised voices.

Dialect is more than just a way of speaking. It is a marker for culture that expresses place, belonging and community. When it is ignored or diluted within visual culture, it becomes devalued and ultimately becomes linguistically erased. The aim of this report is to explore how dialect functions as a form of expression and why its visibility matters within the industry. Not only to make sure that regional phrases appear within design, but to also recognise the politics of language within the visual form. Through exploration of theoretical texts, design criticism and visual references, the research within this report aims to explain how design choices reflect deeper questions of inclusion and identity.

The report is organised into five sections. Following this introduction, the **methodology** outlines the reflective and research-led approach used to investigate the topic. **Context and conversation** section presents a thematic review of relevant literature and design work, which has been grouped into relevant threads that weaves the whole report together including topics such as identity, cultural erasure, typographic history and the expressive form. This section also includes critical themes and insights which brings together the main findings and recurring tensions that have emerged throughout the research. Finally, the conclusion reflects upon the significance of dialect within visual culture and considers how this topic opens new ways of thinking about the representation of dialect within contemporary design.

METHODOLOGY

This report has been constructed by adapting a qualitative and reflective research approach to explore the question: 'Why does the visual representation of dialect matter in an increasingly globalised design culture'. The question at the heart of this project is not technical or mathematical, it is cultural. It doesn't ask how dialect should be visualised, but it does ask why? Why is its visibility so important, and what do we stand to lose when it is no longer a part of the visual landscape. Because of

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this, the research approach focuses on critical analysis, cultural enquiry and reflective analysis of academic and design sources.

Within the report, I have adapted the works of Donald Schön (1983) to form the foundations of my methodology. Within Schön's work 'The Reflective Practitioner', Schön describes reflective thinking as essential to professional learning, especially within fields that deal with complex or evolving problems. Within his work, there are two models of reflection that are identified: "reflection-in-action" which happens during the process of enquiry and "reflection-on-action" which happens after the fact. These ideas have forged the way in which I have engaged with the research throughout the report. This has allowed for a non-linear approach to research, which has allowed me to develop an understanding through questioning, returning to sources which in turn has allowed me to develop an insightful interpretation over time.

Alongside reflection, this report draws upon the process of desk-based research, which includes the close reading of academic literature, design writing and typographic history. This has also been supported by visual culture analysis and contextual observations. These sources have allowed me to provide theoretical background for understanding the cultural, political and social roles of language, as well as allowing me to frame dialect as a source of power, identity and resistance within modern society. In parallel to this, the investigation of design-focused sources allowed for the exploration of typography and how it can be used beyond its use as a technical device by understanding how it can carry tone, personality and a cultural voice. As a designer with a personal connection to the Barnsley dialect, I acknowledge the dual role of both insider and investigator. This has personally informed my sensitivity to language use, and it has also helped to ensure that sources were not read at surface level and has allowed for integration for their broader cultural implications.

Throughout, theory and design were treated as equals instead of separate entities which has allowed me to integrate and weave them into each thread. Design examples were used to evidence how visual communication can reinforce or challenge cultural hierarchies. Typographic case studies were assessed for how they address voice, cultural specificity and irregularity when paired within the dialogue of theoretical material. This has enabled a higher understanding of how visual design choices can include or exclude certain forms of language.

There are however limitations to Schön's method. Reflective and interpretive approaches are by nature subjective. They rely on personal insight and live perspective, which can limit the extent to which findings are generalised. This project also focuses primarily on English dialects and western design contexts, which in turn narrows its cultural scope. However, the aims of the research, which are to explore how dialect functions as a visual and cultural markers within dominant design systems. This therefore allows the methodology to remain appropriate and well justified. By focusing on cultural nuance, reflective enquiry and critical engagement, this approach supports a deeper understanding of why dialect deserves a visible place in visual communication. It allows for a study of design which can not only be used as a tool for clarity, but also as a medium through the expression of voice, identity and resistance.

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CONTEXT AND CONVERSATION

Within this section, there will be key themes, ideas, theories and design discussion that help to frame my investigation into why the visual representation of dialect matters. To understand the complexity of the subject, I have broken this up into key sections that will discuss themes that help to create a layered understanding of why representation is so significant within a modern design culture.

Language, Identity and Representation

Dialect is more than just a language variation or pronunciation for a person. It is a powerful tool of expression that is shaped by a person's location, class and culture. It

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carries themes of belonging, shaping who we are and where we come from. In a way, it is fair to say that dialect is more than just the sounds being spoken, it is a form of cultural memory that is embedded within local knowledge and lived experience.

Within the book Language Death, author and renowned British linguist David Crystal writes "**Every language is a temple, in which the soul of those who speak it is enshrined**" [CRYSTAL, 2000]. These words position dialect and all of language as a deeply personal object that connects the speaker to others that join them within that language. Crystal's use of the word 'soul' is key here within these words, as it suggests that dialect is a very spiritual entity within the person. When the **'soul'** is no longer present, we become empty shells that lack personality, creativity and emotions. In terms of graphic design, this becomes a matter of visibility. Communication is the forefront of all design and is shaped not only by what a person says, but by how the personal says it and presents it. When dialect is withdrawn or forgotten within designs, and replaced with standard universal language, the result can become diluted and culturally detached. The communities that use the design may feel that their voices do not belong and therefore become misrepresented.

Stuart Hall identifies that language is a system of representation within his book Representation – cultural representation and signifying practices. Within this, Hall discusses that "**language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things**" [Hall, 1997]. Within these words, Hall is saying how language doesn't just reflect meaning, it produces it. We understand our identities, histories and culture through the words and symbols that we use throughout our lives. Therefore, it is fair to assume that dialects carry their own sets of rules and meanings that help to shape the speaker's identity. By representing dialect within design, you are acknowledging it's value. It challenges the idea that only certain ways of speaking are worthy of attention. It also invites graphic design to move beyond the barriers of communication and to become a platform of recognition, belonging and voice within the modern world.

Decolonising Design and Challenging Homogeneity

The visual representation of dialect needs to be understood within a wider reach to decolonise design. This includes questioning which voices are prioritised within visual culture, and which are frequently ignored. Modern design principles which are often centred around clarity, neutrality and universality have historically favoured western aesthetics while sidelining regional and vernacular forms of expression. As Madina Tlostanova explains within her design philosophy paper 'On decolonizing design' she writes "**coloniality of design is a control and disciplining of our perception and interpretation of the word, of other human and non-human beings and things according to certain legitimized principles**" [TLOSTANOVA, 2017]. In this context, dialect is often dismissed as too informal or inconsistent to be taken seriously within visual communication.

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This contributes to a homogenised visual culture on which typographic systems and branding principles remove linguistic character and replace it with global legibility. Naomi Klein makes a similar point within her critique of multi-national branding within her publication 'no logo', noting that "**market-driven globalization doesn't want diversity; quite the opposite. Its enemies are national habits, local brands and distinctive regional tastes**" [KLEIN, 2000]. This is an extremely concerning statement as this suggests that global 'trends' are more distinctive and know of methods to try and stamp out distinct vernacular expression.

The marginalisation of dialect in design reflects broader struggles over linguistic legitimacy. As Pierre Bourdieu argues within his book 'language and symbolic power', "**The official language is bound up with the state, both in genesis and in its social uses**" [BOURDIEU, 1991]. By presenting certain ways of speaking as a more valid than others, globalised design norms being to echo these dynamics. "**Every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce**" [BOURDIEU, 1991]. The suppression of dialect within visual design is not incidental, but part of a deeper, symbolic system that maintains cultural hierarchy.

Reintroducing dialect into visual design is not just a stylistic design choice. It becomes an act of cultural and political significance. Tlostanova describes this as "**Re-existance**" which is defined as "**an effective decolonial strategy (re)creating positive life models, sensations and worlds that help in overcoming the injustice and imperfections of this present world**" [TLOSTANOVA, 2017]. She later goes on to argue that decolonial design "**would be a creative and dynamic reflection and realization of the people's forgotten and discarded needs, wishes and longings**" [TLOSTANOVA, 2017]. This is key in terms of understanding why including more dialect within visual design is important because it would allow for further connectivity between design and viewer to be explored, as well as allowing for personal ownership of the design to occur. To represent dialect is to go against sameness. It offers a way to reclaim space for local knowledge, lived language and cultural specifics within a global design culture that often prefers the opposite.

Phonetic and Sonic Typography

For the longest time, traditional typography has been designed to support the written word by utilising systems that aim towards uniformity, legibility and fixed spelling. While this was effective for standardised language, this approach lacks the ability to accommodate for the expressive, irregular nature of dialect and its regional variations. Dialect carries meaning in many different forms, while vocabulary may be seen as the primary method, sound, rhythm and regional pronunciation plays a major part in making sure that representation occurs. These elements often go unrepresented when typography is treated as purely visual. When designers follow the traditional norms of typographic systems and prioritise consistency, they risk erasing the emotional and cultural depths of the spoken language.

Phonetic and sonic typography offers a more expressive approach to the common methods of transcribing speech into standard letterforms. These methods seek to represent how language sounds can be captured and isolated to understand what

makes regional dialects so distinctive. Through design methods such as layout shifts, repetition, spacing and form manipulation, designers can approximate the flow of speech and see the tone of the dialect. This allows typography to behave as a performative piece and less like silent text. These techniques are so valuable to the representation of dialect, as they can reflect the character that would have otherwise been lost in translation from sound to page.

This idea is translated across the broader field of graphic design, with sound becoming a growing part of communication. In a recent article on sonic branding via the online platform Medium, SJ Design Co. wrote "**Sonic branding is more than just a fad; it's a strategic tool for creating a memorable soundscape, brands can tap into the power of sound to differentiate themselves, engage audiences, and create lasting impressions**" [SJ Design Co, 2024]. While this article focuses on branding and isn't specifically talking about dialect or typography, the underlying principle of sound is highly applicable to the wider scope of visual communication. If sound can carry emotional weight and define identity through audio-based branding, then visual design, especially those that feature typographic elements can be approached in ways that reflect the core principles of sound, rhythm and voice. This is especially important when working with dialects, which are deeply tied to regional and cultural identities.

Interacting with concepts and constructed design projects offers a powerful opportunity for understanding the qualities that sonic typography possesses in contrast to static typography. A compelling example of this is the project **Phonetic Typography by Mark Chen (2018)**. FIG 1 and 2. This was an experimental project that uses computational design tools to explore the relationship between speech and typographic form. Within this work, typographic elements respond in real time to the user's voice, causing the typographic elements to shift in scale, rhythm and special arrangement depending on the phonetic input. As a result of this, the typography becomes a performance piece instead of the static form of the written word. This approach, however experimental, directly aligns with the goals of understanding the importance of making dialect visible, and not just through spelling, but by through the visualisation of sound itself.

Chen's work enables viewers to see the rhythm, emphasis and pitch which would typically be associated with regional or expressive speech. These elements are so crucial to the identity of dialect but are often forgotten or erased by typographic systems. But by using responsive digital design tools, **Phonetic Typography** allows the voice to leave a visual footprint that reflects actual sonic qualities. This moves typography beyond being a purely visual system and repositions it as a multi-sensory practice that has the ability to represent the cultural and emotional layers of language. Due to dialects having marginalised linguistic frameworks, this experimental method offers an inclusive and innovative way to reclaim visibility. This project challenges how sonic and phonetic typography can challenge the established typographic norms and make space for voices that have historically silenced or overlooked within design systems.
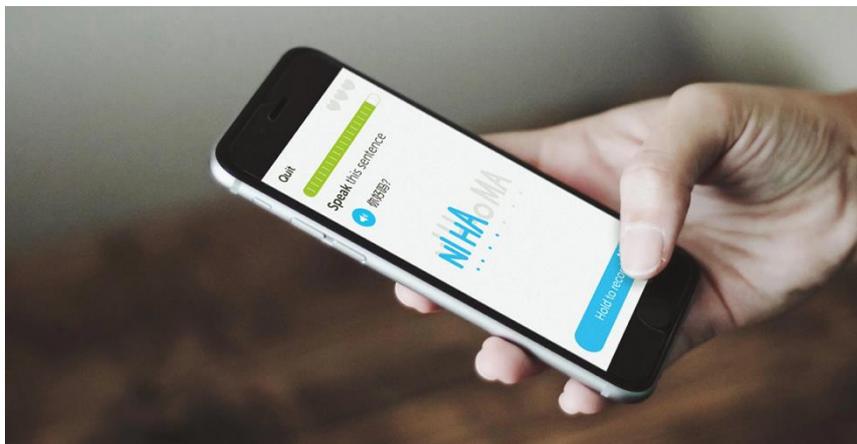
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Fig 1.

Fig 2.

Dialect and Place: The Barnsley Context

Barnsley is more than just a place in South Yorkshire; it is a place that has been defined by its deep industrial past, working-class pride and its core sense of community. The town has been historically shaped by its long-standing connection to the coal mining and manufacturing industries; Barnsley has forged an identity that is strong with resilience and solidarity. This identify is expressed powerfully through the way in which people speak. The Barnsley accent is not just a variation of the English language, it is a vocal expression of place, heritage and belonging. It carries emotion, social cues and cultural knowledge that cannot be separated from the context in which it is spoken.

The Barnsley dialect is often classed as a variation of the South Yorkshire English and is characterised by distinct phonetic grammatical and lexical feature. Words like 'owt', 'nowt', 'bairn' and 'mardy' form part of a shared linguistic identity, while dropped consonants and shorted vowels mark the rhythm of the local speech. Beyond its technical features, Barnsley's dialect conveys warmth, familiarity and cultural memory. It reflects a region that has often been underrepresented or stereotyped within mainstream British culture. In everyday conversations, the dialect has become

more of a living archive of Barnsley's social history that has been passed down between generations through ordinary spoken conversations.

In this sense, it is fair to say that dialect is inseparable from place. But despite its cultural significance, it remains to largely be invisible within the field of graphic design. Mainstream design practices continue to favour standard forms of English, spelling and as well as the adoption of clean, modernist typefaces. This in turn creates generic brand voices that continue to erase regional voices. Within this context, it is also possible that the Barnsley dialect is at risk of being sidelined die to its inability to conform to dominant visual and linguistic norms. The act of making the dialect visible through typographic treatment, layouts and imagery is an act of social and cultural affirmation and not just a stylistic choice.

Literature and cinema have played an important role in keeping Barnsley's dialect culturally visible. Barry Hines's 1968 novel **A Kestrel for a Knave** and its 1969 film adaption **Kes** (directed by Ken Loach), are landmark examples. The film in particular was iconic due to its use of local, non-professional actors and retains the natural speech of Barnsley schoolboys. This offered for a more authentic portrayal of working-class life within the town. The use of dialect in **Kes** was so striking, that subtitles had to be introduced for international audiences. This highlights both the richness and the inaccessibility of local language to outsiders. Similarly, author **Millie Johnson** is an amazing example of how dialect can be represented within literature. Johnson's novels are deeply rooted within the South Yorkshire area and consistently writes about characters that speak the Barnsley dialect. Her use of the local language is an important tool for the author as it is used to create emotional realism, local connections between the reader and the world in which she has created and cultural specificity. These examples are key to demonstrating the power that comes with representing dialect and it shows that dialect is not just about linguistics, it can be used a powerful tool to convey narratives of shaping tone, perspective and place. Despite there being recognition within literature and cinema, there remains to be a lack of recognition of Barnsley's dialect within the field of graphic design and the modern visual culture. This lack of representation is key to understanding where changes need to happen within the modern design culture. Designers have an opportunity to build upon the high levels of tradition that comes with historical dialects, by utilising typographic forms to reflect the rhythm, tone and emotional depth that comes with dialect. By doing so, designers can challenge the dominance of standardised communication and create spaces of lived expressionism within contemporary design. Barnsley's dialect is not a historic relic that is destined for extinction, it is so much more. It is a living, dynamic force that displays a person's identity and more so, deserves to be preserved within the modern design culture.

Typographic Expression and Cultural Voice

Typography is often framed as a tool that is used within everyday design practices. It is often seen as a system for taking the written language and repurposing it for more efficient methods of viewing. It is often used to also improve the clarity of text for a given audience. This form of definition however is more of a clinical view of typography and completely removes the view of typography's expressive potential. Typography, like dialect has the amazing ability to carry tone, rhythm and identity. It can shape a message to carry emotion and add in feeling, causing it to add value for the reader or viewer. As noteworthy typographer Ellen Lupton writes within her book 'Thinking with Type' **"Typography is an ongoing tradition that connects you with other designers, past and future."** [ELLEN LUPTON, 2004:pg10]. This quote highlights the cultural and historical dimensions of typography and its significance within the modern design culture. This suggests that typography is more than a fixed system, it is a constantly evolving form of visual language. When designers engage with typographic expression, they are contributing to an ongoing project that will also allow for visualising diverse cultural voices.

The term 'cultural voice' refers to the visual qualities that reflect the speaker and their lineage. This could be their community's identity, values and their social position. The spoken dialect varies in accent, pace and inflection. Whereas typographic voices can be loud, soft, bold, hesitant, rhythmic or erratic. Typography at its core is about visual storytelling. The ability to convey the regional character, social mood, or political

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resistance. Expressive typography therefore holds a high level of relevance for the representation of dialect. It enables designs to feel authentic to the sound and feel of regional speech by reflecting its irregularities, informal tones and textures.

Historically, the push for clarity and legibility within modern designs has marginalised the more expressive approaches to typographic design in the global pursuit of universality amongst modernist typography. There has been a major push for the use of Sans-serif typefaces, grid systems and standardised layout which has caused massive reduction in opportunities for individualised or cultural expression. These principles are to this day still widely dominant within the industry, especially within the modern corporate design scene. These designs are often trying to reinforce a hierarchy within the design that favours 'neutral' voices over local working-class ones. Within this context, it is then fair to assume that by designing for the use of expressive typography is an act of resistance against the modernist design culture. By doing so, the designer is challenging the visual norms of today and is reclaiming a space for difference and change.

Within the industry, there are lots of influential designers that challenge the visual norms of modern design. Designers such as David Carson and Neville Brody have become instrumental to the disruption of typographic conventions and redefining what the voice looks like within design. Carson's work with Ray Gun Magazine during the 1990's (FIG 3 and 4) used fractional layouts, distressed typography and in some cases, illegibility as a tool to reflect the chaotic energy of youth culture. His typographic work didn't seek to be apologetic or approving. It shouted, repeated itself and visually stammered. Similarly to Carson's work, Neville Brody's typographic expressionism is second to none. As shown within Fig 6. Brody's design evokes typographic chaos into the design to show key messages that simply break conventions and tear down the barriers that modernist designers put up within the industry. Both designers have helped to legitimise expressive typography as a form of communication for cultural atmosphere and emotional intensity rather than just simple content.

For the representation of dialect to happen within the modern design culture, this shift needs to happen. Dialects by their own nature are inherited forms of self-expression. They carry location, emotion and identity which can only be displayed through lived experience. Standard forms of typography cannot represent this as effectively, simply due to its qualities. Standard type is built to flatten and normalise difference, when the difference should be celebrated within the design. Expressive typography enables designers to reflect the idea of regional voices such as the Barnsley dialect. This allows the dialect to exist on its own terms as its own identity for cultural voice.

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Fig 3.

Fig 4.

Fig 5.

Conclusion

This report sets out to explore why the visualisation of dialect matters within an increasingly globalised design culture. Through theoretical reflection, cultural analysis and visual research, the findings within this report show that dialect is far more than a person's accent. It is a visual and vocal form of expressionism that holds a person's identity, belonging and inherited shared history. When it is excluded from the modern design scene, it is not only silenced, but it also goes into a state of cultural devalue.

Throughout the report, I have argued that dominant visual systems that have been shaped by modernist design trends and corporate ideals. This has caused a shift in the priorities to favour clarity and uniformity at the expense of diverse and lived experience. When treated as neutral or universal, typographic design fails to reflect the emotional and cultural tone that is carried with regional languages. By allowing this to continue, there becomes a loss of local language as well as whole ways of being, thinking and expressing. Dialect is embedded with rhythm, tone and personality, it deserves to be treated with typographic forms that can capture its irregularities and expressive values.

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Within the industry, designers like David Carson and Neville Brody have demonstrated how typography can be used to express voice, energy and cultural atmosphere and not just as a tool for organising content. Their work disrupts conventions and offers a model for how typographic design can carry emotion and individuality. The examples shown within the report convey that typography is not a silent tool for language, it is a visual practice that actively shapes how language is understood. This opens space for regional dialects (such as the Barnsley accent) to be visualised as a meaningful expression of place and identity.

The other key message within this report is based around who is represented within design, and who is overlooked. Including dialect within design is not just about adding in regional words or spellings into design to keep people happy, it is about representation and understanding the politics of voice. This is about who gets to be seen and heard within visual culture, Through the examples of literature, cinema, sonic branding and experimental typography, it has become clear that dialect carries emotional resonance and cultural resistance. Its visibility is not about being nostalgic, it is a necessary connection to a persons' identity. As designers, we have a responsibility to create communication that reflects real communities and not just corporate design ideals. If design continues to prioritise global uniformity, it risks contributing to cultural erasure and language extinction. But by embracing dialect as a design material that can be shaped and performed, we can begin to create a culture for design that values specificity over sameness.

Overall, the visual representation of dialect is not a stylistic choice. It is a question of belonging. Its asks us to listen more closely, to design with care and to see language as something that needs to be celebrated. In doing so, we allow design to become a space for recognition, representation and voice.

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