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**Culture, Society and Politics interpreted
through a Designer's Bilingual Filter.
The City of Ethnos: My Filter**

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President
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Abstract

The United States has gone through what some would call radical changes regarding issues related to immigration and people of different races. 9-11 left a mark in the nation's conscience facilitating a rhetoric that fosters fears towards others. These changes in the political and cultural arena are seen in society; through conversations, attitudes, belief systems and others. In most cases, homogeneous thoughts prevail in groups that share common values. But what happens when someone is an immigrant and yet he/she is also part of the group? How are discussions and conversations seen through the eyes of one who, given the current rhetoric, is considered an outsider? As a bilingual speaker and as a person who holds a US citizenship and yet was born and raised in another country, I look at the current climate and wonder; Where is our society headed regarding issues of equality, diversity, cross cultural communication, openness, etc. The current rhetoric in both traditional and social media is charged with messages that some interpret one way and others like me, interpret in a differently. Borrowing from designers in the past such as El Lissitzky, the Bauhaus, Kandinsky, and John Heartfield, I explore current political issues in the form of posters to provoke a dialogue and ask ourselves poignant questions about what we hear and fear.

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Introduction

The City of Ethnos is a personal response to the current hotly debated issues in the United States regarding immigration, Arizona and Alabama state laws, and related situations on the news that have occurred since the tragic events of 9-11. The City of Ethnos is the concept of a city where there is a pretense of diversity but in reality diversity is spoken of but not practiced. The City of Ethnos is an attempt to make a statement against racial profiling, animosity against immigrants, and the belief that whites are superior to any other ethnic group.

Personal Background

I arrived to the corn state of Iowa in the middle of a snowstorm in 1993. The ample fields of corn and farmland fascinated me. I immigrated to the United States from Puerto Rico, a US Commonwealth, also known as a colony. Puerto Rico is a country that is in many ways tainted by what some might describe as a dysfunctional relationship with the United States. There are indeed benefits to this alliance but it has not been without a cost, culturally, politically and socially. The scar is so deep that a political discussion among friends and family might end up in a fight at great personal cost. Growing up I was taught not to talk politics or religion with anybody. At school teachers who favor the route of political independence for Puerto Rico and taught us folkloric music, were often called to the principal's office to explain their actions and teachings. Thus, it was clear to me at a very early age that there was an agenda from some groups to suppress any voice that confronted a status quo that favored the Commonwealth or better yet, statehood. Though things have somewhat changed and there is now a strong national pride, it is considered a healthy pride as long as it does not threaten this political and dysfunctional affair between the United States and the Commonwealth.

This love and hate relationship started more than a century ago when Spain lost the Spanish American war to the United States in 1898. Puerto Rico was offered as a gift of war to the United States. Thus, after 500 years of Spanish colonization and becoming a country with a language, culture, political system and infrastructure, Puerto Rico had to make a forced adjustment and relearn its ways to conform to the American standards of living. Yet, these two countries could not be more different.

Geographically, culturally, socially, and at least in the local political sphere, my landscape was not American. I grew up as a Puertorrican who had an American citizenship. This is an important distinction in Puerto Rico. As oxymoronic as this might sound, it means you are not American but you are American. I would come to the States and visit. However, it was after 1993 when I relocated that I started to understand the racial tension between Americans and immigrants. I had seen from the outside the political and federal force of United States in other countries and in my country. I had seen what commonly has been called American Imperialism be imposed around the world. After 1993, I started to see the things I had seen from the outside from the inside as both a citizen of the United States and as an immigrant who did not grow up American.

Feeling as if I navigate in two parallels lanes that often cross, I have been observing American attitudes, behaviors, conversations, etc., through this unique lens that being a citizen who is not believed to be really a citizen offers me. This situation is also magnified by the fact that my Latino brothers and sisters many times offer comments of sarcasm both at the way Puertorricans speak the Spanish language and the fact that

we have an American citizenship. This makes for a challenging situation because though Puertorricans are Latinos they are neither considered true Latinos or true Americans. In the eyes of many Americans we are second-class citizens and often do suffer discrimination based on skin color and accent.

Studying, living and working in the United States since 1993 has provided me with meaningful experiences that have shaped the one question I seek to explore: why do we feel we can treat others as if they are of less value merely based on their ethnicity and social status? It is a simple question often even taught at grade school level, yet somehow we fall short of providing a satisfying answer that seeks to reorient our actions. We do however, justify our less than desirable attitudes based on unemployment, crime rates, financial crisis, and any other reason that we deem reasonable to sustain our positions. Conveniently forgetting or willfully dehumanizing those who are the object of our irrationality, we engage in conversations that foster attitudes of racism if not full racism and discrimination.

Rationale

I came to the United States to pursue a graduate degree in Graphic Design. I discovered the immense responsibility being a designer regarding the making and producing of artifacts that compelled or enticed human behavior. I learned that visual communication and design are an expression of the social, cultural and political times in which it is produced. Movements in the past made alliances with governments both from the right and left to promote a political party's ideals. Movements such as Futurism and Russian Constructivism are both examples of efforts to promote an ideology and a political view.

Historical examples of designers, whose work either supported the status quo or questioned it, are the works of El Lissitzky creating work in favor of communist ideals and engineering as the promise of progress and the work of John Heartfield protesting the Nazi establishment with poignant photomontages. In short, I learned that designers create within the context in which they live and this context is often the reason why they create.

Following the tragic events of 9-11 and how these changed the social rhetoric and landscape in the United States the rhetoric in the country went from advocating diversity to advocating fear; fear of the stranger, fear of the immigrant, fear of the Muslim, fear of anything that could in the very least look dangerous. These changes in the American landscape were not abrupt but rather it was a slow and methodical implementation of measures with the stated purpose of ensuring the United States' safety. Examples include the presence of the military at airports; the removing of shoes and socks, the invasive and sometimes arbitrary searches, the color-coded terrorist alert system, the 3-3-3 program for liquids and toiletries, the full body scanners, warrantless wire-tapping, and a series of measures that in the large scheme challenge our human rights.

Though the majority of the American public have found these measures necessary and even welcome them, extensive debates have been held increasingly in the media regarding their effectiveness, the invasion of privacy, and the length we as a nation are willing to give up civil rights for the appearance of safety. The rhetoric has been successful enough that many American citizens would relinquish their civil rights in order to feel safe. Dr. Noah Toly, Director of Urban Studies at Wheaton College states:

‘Our sense of that the world is a dangerous place is easily and frequently manipulated. In other words, we are often urged to act out of fear.’

These issues have translated into hot debates regarding the presence of undocumented and documented immigrants in the United States. This includes recent efforts to give law enforcement the ability to stop and detain anybody they deemed looked foreign and ask for identification papers. Kris Kobach, named ‘America’s Deporter in Chief’ by Tony Dukoupil in his article for Newsweek magazine, states the following regarding immigration:

‘People often see federal immigration policy as a dichotomy between amnesty and deportation. But the most rational approach is a third one: you ratchet up the enforcement so that people make their own decisions to start following the law.’ In other words, take away the reasons people come to America illegally—education, work, housing, and, yes, citizenship for their kids—and, Kobach says, they will ‘self-deport.’

Dukoupil continues to state that many constitutional experts consider Kobach’s measures ‘tenable, even clever.’ This statement is evidence of how profoundly affected the American climate is considering the fact that the United States Constitution grants citizenship to any child born in United States soil. Kobach was also affiliated with FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform). Amanda Peterson Beadle, a reporter for Think Progress, states that ‘one of the main goals [of FAIR] is to overturn the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ‘ended a decades-long, racist quota system that limited immigration mostly to northern Europeans.’ She continues to that ‘FAIR’s founder John Tanton has said that he wants the U.S. to remain a majority-white nation through limiting the number of non-whites who enter the U.S.’

Against the context of fear of terrorism and the apparent loss of civil freedoms, the new millennium witnessed the birth and rise of a big phenomenon: social media. Social media has provided the outlet for information to be spread and in many cases in real time. The recent uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt for instance were organized through social media and reported in real time. Though we designers have at our disposition such great tools in social media, dialogue that touches on the core issues—such as a rhetoric of fear—we currently face as a society are almost non-existent. Designer Josef Muller-Brockman quoted by Adrian Shaughnessy in his book *How to be a Graphic Designer without losing your Soul*, stated, ‘All design work has political character.’ Design indeed has political character and it is a political endeavor. Sadly, not making a statement about an issue is in itself a political statement.

Shel Perkins in his book *Talent is Not Enough: Business Secrets for Designers* states the following:

‘Designers need to play a larger role— not just responding but initiating. We need to bring our personal beliefs and professional activities into alignment. Through our work, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to put our system of basic values into action— to model the behavior we want to see in the world (296).’

Frequently we designers speak about the power of design to change our lives, to make them better, and to enhance our lives. The question then is if designers create responding to their context, how do I create work to engage others in a discourse that enhances our lives, gives us perspective, and provokes us to think and question the current rhetoric? What should my contribution be?

The City of Ethnos concept and posters

The City of Ethnos is the concept of the perfect city through the elimination of anything or anyone that does not conform to the status quo. It attempts to question the direction of the current rhetoric in the United States regarding immigrants, terrorism, fear, and the economic crisis. What follows is the full description of the concept of the city:

The City of Ethnos is the city of perfection and the city of hope. A city where those frustrated with the politics of their native countries regarding immigration and racial openness come to start anew. It is the city of peace, order, freedom, pride in their ancestors, and a desire to work towards racial purity and not afraid of taking risks. It is the city of those who want a better of life.

The City of Ethnos is a very “diverse” country. There are 90,000 approved citizens from all over the world. These citizens have been selected based on a skin color rubric. Because 9 skin colors are approved, one can see people of various skin colors. Ethnic diversity is based on 9 colors that ought to maintain approved diversity. This measure also ensures a progressive and gradual racial purification in the most humane possible manner. There are others waiting approval to enter the City of Ethnos. Those not approved by the City of Ethnos Council are relocated in the Detention facilities pending extradition.

The religion of the City of Ethnos is Ethnicism and the diety is Ethnia. Only one religion is approved by the City of Ethnos.

There’s only one approved language and that is Ethnian. Those seeking approval to relocate in the city of Ethnos must attend language classes and be proficient. No other language is tolerated.

The City of Ethnos allows Ethnian citizens who present approved documentation to have jobs. Failure to provide such documentation results in being sent to the Deportation Center for a comprehensive investigation and time of reflection under the supervision of the City of Ethnos Border Patrol.

I created the concept of The City of Ethnos because I believe human rights are owed to those who are human. It is that simple. As a society we need to consider that our rights are not exclusive to a nation, color, and legal or social status.

The City of Ethnos started with the idea of using the word ethnicity to communicate diversity. Every letter would be painted in a different skin color from light to dark. As the paint on the letters was drying, the word city became evident. After listening to my daughter say, ‘it’s a city!’ the idea of the City of Ethnos was born.

For the development of the idea of the City of Ethnos, a logo and a flag were developed. The logo as shown in Figure 1, p.7, is a lowercase ‘e’ with its crossbar altered by adding a small square in the center. The small square becomes center of the 9 stars crowning the lowercase e. Each star represents a skin color and a series of 9 areas of concern for the city’s optimum development. The flag is a radiating pattern emanating from the same center in the lowercase e as the stars.

There are seven posters so far: ‘**The City of Ethnos tourist poster**’, which explains the stats of the city, see Figure 2, p. 8, ‘**1-800-DEPORT-EM**’, denouncing the efforts to deport those who are not native speakers, ‘**Is Mickey an Ethian citizen?**’ satirizing the appreciation of a fictional character as a member of the American culture, ‘**Ethnicity skin color chart**’, see Figure 3, p 9, implying the need of a self assessment to make sure every citizen skin color is approved, ‘**Book Hall of Fame**’ addressing laws banning books about ethnicity in schools, ‘**Detention Center**’ addressing what

our society does with those who are different, and ‘**Freedom of thought**’ addressing the censorship and lack of freedom of thought.

These posters aim to provoke a conversation, to present us with a mirror of what we are doing and or approving either by omission or by actions in the name of fear, in the name of unemployment, and in the name of financial crisis. These posters ask the following questions: are we justified in devaluing others in the face of adversity? Are we willing to lose our dignity as human beings to ensure our safety, an uniformity of thought, job opportunities, and financial stability? The answers we provide will most likely determine not only actions but also the future of our fragile humanity.

Figure 1. City of Ethnos logo



Figure 2. The City of Ethnos tourist poster



Figure 3. Ethnicity skin color chart



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