

# BLACK DESIGN STILL MISSING IN ACTION?

The author of a 30-year-old *Print* article on diversity surveys the industry to see who is designing the solution to a problem that continues to this day.

by Cheryl D. Holmes-Miller

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**I**t's been nearly 30 years since *Print* published my first article, "Black Designers: Missing in Action." I was completing my communications design coursework at Pratt Institute. The head of the program at the time, Etan Manasse, demanded that I *not* submit a design thesis project to fulfill my degree requirements. Instead, he asked me to make "a contribution to our industry."

The editorial and advertising offices of *Print* magazine were blocks from my design firm in New York City. Empowered with purpose, I will always remember marching over to the Fifth Avenue hub with a manila clasp envelope in hand, containing my thesis "Transcending the Problems of the Black Graphic Designer to Success in the Market Place." It was tagged with a naively handwritten yellow Post-It: "I would like to have my enclosed thesis become a magazine article." Before I could return to my drafting table and get situated for a day of work, the phone rang. Martin Fox, *Print's* longtime editor, called me directly—they wanted it.

In September 1987, my article was published and shed light on a disenfranchising issue facing black graphic designers. The graphic design industry had no idea about the anomaly of black designers or that they even existed. I questioned if the industry was the entity missing out on a segment of practitioner, or if it really was the black designer who was missing in action. After pages of narrative and presenting a catalog of black designers, I concluded that black designers indeed boldly existed, but were missing from view.

*Print* allowed my voice to emerge, and began the industry's primary discussion of diversity, equality and inclusion. The discussion evolved into subsequent AIGA articles, conferences and new voices pushing the envelope of this important topic.

Thirty years have passed, and the black designer is *still* looking for solutions to a lack of visibility. Now greater in numbers than in 1987, the black design community is demanding its own solutions. Throughout this article, you'll find an array of designers who read my original article and sought me out, whether to thank me, seek my counsel or just say hello; they are black designers, in action, today. My words remain: Not using the designer of color in today's marketplace is a missed opportunity. It was a missed opportunity in 1987 and it's a missed opportunity today as the end marketplace has diversified and become global.

For decades, I've fielded inquiries from designers, researchers, academicians and the like, unearthing me and seeking my current reflections. The most recent inquiry led me back to *Print*.

Thirty years have served me well; a design project for Union Theological Seminary led me to embrace a theological education. I have uniquely professionalized both occupation and vocation. Most importantly, I can now consider how to frame the decades of gleaning wisdom about succeeding as a designer and, against all odds, a black designer.

So many things have changed over the years, especially my voice and identity. I seemingly have arrived at a destina-

tion where there is a racial, cultural and ethnic seat for my personal truths. In 1987, there were no multiracial categories other than *black* for me to self-identify. I was considered and even branded myself as a *black designer*. Suppressing my truths of being multiracial, there was no place and it was no time for me to come out of the proverbial "one-drop" thinking of my blackness and trying to succeed as a designer. Racial ambiguity shrouded my family's truth of actually being African American, white and Filipino. My dad's pre-Civil Rights era solution of having mixed-raced kids was to raise me as a black woman: "Cheryl, be the best black woman you can be."

By 1987 I had completed my undergraduate and graduate degrees and was a practicing designer in New York City. Somehow I knew exactly what the industry would be facing in the 21st-century "-isms" of race, culture and ethnicity. We would be facing new messages, new peoples and demanding audiences. I sounded the alarm. So that was then, and here we are now. The 21st-century designer's palette is more than the black-and-white shades of my baby boomer world. It is full of global colors, traditions, cultures, ethnicities and new uncharted ethos of race and gender. The graphic design industry and its practitioners, along with many cross-disciplines and industries, must *finally* embrace the topics of diversity, equality and inclusion in today's world.

## A NEW DAY

Every morning I drink my coffee, read my emails and post on Facebook. I keep up with my social media skills and try not to have my graphic design advocacies haunt me. But my mind does wander to my basement full of The Cheryl D. Miller Design Inc. studio of yesteryear.

One day, I was sipping and clicking as usual, and to my surprise a peculiar post caught my attention. It was a JPEG and the charge, "Vote for Akilah Johnson's Doodle 4 Google Competition, 'What Makes Me ... Me.' Help Akilah win a scholarship. Vote for her Doodle, 'My Afrocentric Life.'"



**Bobby C. Martin Jr.**  
Martin is a designer and

educator in New York City. He co-founded OCD: The Original Champions of Design in 2010 with Jennifer Kinon. Together they develop brand identity systems for a broad range of clients—from the Girl Scouts of the USA to *The New York Times* and Nike.

"It's so important for people of color to be involved in design organizations and events," he says. "In New York City, people like Michele Washington, Victor Newman, Jonathan Jackson, Ian Spalter, Forest Young, myself and others have sat on the board of AIGA/NY. Richard Hollant [and] Ashleigh Axios have recently been appointed to the AIGA board at the national level. Gus Granger and Antionette Carroll and others have done a great job leading the diversity initiatives for AIGA. ... You need to be a part of the system to change the system."

Akilah Johnson was a 15-year-old African American 10th grader in Northeast Washington, DC. My immediate thought was, “Good luck with that ...”

And just as quickly as my old-school realities flashed by, I wondered if maybe things *had* changed somewhat. Maybe enough that a variety of diverse imagery could indeed represent today’s global community.

Segmented marketing campaigns of the 1980s contained visual ethnicities directed to 12–15% of the population. Herb Kemp, the black advertising pioneer and former executive for UniWorld Group, was best known for developing ethnic market TV campaigns for Burger King. The “have it your way” slogan primarily targeted blacks and Hispanics. Kemp believed and shared with me then that advertising “must communicate to a larger, broader community.” He contended that black culture, and its rich imagery, had to cross over. No longer should it be confined only to one community. He spoke prophetic words to me in our 1987 interview.

Today, Johnson’s Google entry was a challenge of not only excellence, but also acceptance.

Immediately, I shared the voting link to the 10,000-member Facebook group “I Grew Up In DC.” Johnson’s dream had been my dream; I thoroughly understood the call to be our true selves in the expression of our art and craft.

And then, soon enough, it happened: “My Afrocentric Life” was selected from nearly 100,000 student entries from all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Guam. Johnson is Doodle 4 Google’s first African American doodle winner. She will receive a \$30,000 college scholarship and a \$50,000 education-technology grant for her high school.

Johnson’s achievement is a great success, and it’s worth noting that she has been exposed to a superior art education. Her Eastern Senior High School art teacher, Zalika Perkins, is trending as the best art teacher in America, having won \$80,000 in Google grant and award monies for her inspired advocacy. While studying at Georgia State University, Perkins worked closely with the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards program, a national art competition for accomplished students.



**Lisa N. Alexander**

Known as “The Marketing Stylist,” and author of *This Woman Knows*, Alexander has worked as an art director, graphic designer and marketing consultant throughout her 20-year career. As a consultant, she helps small business owners grow their enterprises through strategic marketing and branding.

“Early in my career, I was practically ‘the only one,’” Alexander says, “the only person of color doing production work—and I was almost always the only woman of color. I didn’t see people of color in lead design roles in the mainstream positions I held. ... I was in my mid-20s when I moved to Houston, and that’s when I discovered that a community of black designers existed. I didn’t know women of color were succeeding at such a high level.”

**Black graphic designers have great opportunity to fill an incredible void caused by a changing American platform, palette and demographic. It’s time to be the solution; it’s time to be seen, designing the solution now.**

She noticed there was a lack of diversity among Scholastic entrants who advanced to final categories. Inspired to make a difference, she began exposing her own students to art competitions. It became her drive to fill the void for diversity in the competition arena. “[Johnson] winning gave confidence to many students who did not previously think that the arts were a practical thing to pursue or that they could ever accomplish something on such a great scale,” Perkins says. “I think that the outpouring of support came from many people who were excited to see her viewpoint—a viewpoint that is rarely seen in mainstream arts and design. Participating in national competitions gives African American artists like Akilah exposure and visibility.”

Needless to say, I was speechless to discover Akilah had won, and won big. Art education, great inspiration and answering the call to make a diverse difference in the art and design world put this Mid-Atlantic school on the map. It does, indeed, all begin in the classroom—the seeds of planting change for tomorrow.

## A NEW PALETTE

Always making an effort to keep my graphic design knowledge current, I found my way to a 2015 AIGA event on branding. It was being held at SASD—the Shintaro Akatsu School of Design, quietly secluded on the campus of the University of Bridgeport. I had sojourned for a personal graphic design update, and I found more than I was expecting.

At the helm of the event was Alex W. White, associate professor of design management and graphic design at the University of Bridgeport, author of several bestselling design books and chairman emeritus of the Type Directors Club in New York City. Definitely cut from my old-school cloth of design thinking, White finds himself in Connecticut breaking new ground in graphic design education. He chairs the graduate Design Management program at Bridgeport to enlarge designers’ understanding of their potential contribution to the business. The Master of Professional Studies Design Management program collects students from a broad range of backgrounds and allows them to

**“Diversity begets diversity, which in turn breeds innovation. If we keep the door closed to diverse talent because of subconscious or unconscious bias, we are limiting our access to change, innovation, new solutions and ultimately financial success. Diversity of thought, perspectives, age, gender, experiences, cultures, race, etc., should be reflected in the images that we project to reach all consumers.”**

—CICI HOLLOWAY

share design innovation in new and exciting ways. They learn the business of design for today and tomorrow’s application.

White and I met at the AIGA event and he offered me an occasion to speak to his design management class. Not knowing what to expect, both the class and I subsequently learned from one another. The class became aware of the importance of developing diversity strategies within the context of design management, and I was truly surprised by White’s classroom and its new student demographic and global palette.

My curiosity demanded further attention; I asked White if we could meet for coffee. I just had to offer an observation and ask one question: The white students were in the minority—“Where are these students from exactly?”

White’s classroom demographic screamed of a changed design academic landscape. Thirty years ago, I predicted this evolution would occur. Dorothy Ford, now retired, was the Rhode Island School of Design’s longest-standing administrator for

diversity. In 1987, I found “Dot” running the Minority Student Affairs office, renamed the Multicultural Affairs Office in 1992. In our interview for my first article, she shared that 49 minority



**Michele Y. Washington**

Washington is a user experience researcher, human interaction designer and a faculty member at the Fashion Institute of Technology, where she teaches branding and design.

“My best advice to younger black designers is to be more inclusive and spread your wings,” she says. “As designers of color, we have an exchange of culture and intellect that fuels our creative DNA and brainpower. We need to capitalize on it. ... You need to be a big thinker, a good listener ... [and be] willing to work in teams and collaborate with people.”

students out of 1,800 total represented only about 2% of the RISD population.

Today, people of color make up more than 30% of RISD's undergrad population. Moreover, out of roughly 2,500 students total, 935 are international students—and for undergraduates, graphic and industrial design are the most popular majors.

Now, *that's* change.

All across the U.S., we have arrived at a well-populated, diverse representation of a world community. Graphic design's paradigm of the 1960s Madison Avenue white male-dominated design practitioner shifted; the shift has shifted.

White specifically answered my question with an anecdote from his personal observations: "I see that international and minority students are now in the majority. I expect that trend to continue. ... I see [that] a 70-30 split of graphic design students is female-dominant. It used to be the other way around a generation ago." RISD student body statistics confirm roughly the same as White's estimate—the undergrad population in 2014 was 66.7% female and 33.3% male.

White's insights also embody my personal update on the new global flair in the design community: "International students are more present today than a generation ago, in part because there are fewer American college-aged students to enroll, and in part because internationalism encourages international students to attend college in the U.S. ... One reason domestic design students are more diverse—perhaps—is because the changing, evolving middle classes, inclusive of African Americans and other minorities in the U.S. today, are more willing to accept design as a legitimate income-producing discipline."

The feasibility of a career in the arts—that was a perception analyzed in my original 1987 article. Back then, studying the arts was considered a luxury, rather than something that could actually support one financially. Joseph William Sims explored this concept in "A Study of the Attitudes of Black Parents Toward Vocational and Non-Vocational Education," and revealed that 60% of those surveyed preferred their children to study more "traditional" professions, and a mere 5% said they would like their children to enter an artistic field. Today, that has evolved.



**Maurice Cherry**  
Cherry is the founder and principal of

Launch, a design and consulting studio in Atlanta. He is most well-known, however, for the Black Weblog Awards—the longest-running event celebrating black bloggers, vloggers and podcasters. In 2015, Cherry published an AIGA article titled "Where are the Black Designers?"

"Let's look at what we know," he wrote. "Design-driven companies in Silicon Valley like Twitter report only single-digit percentages of American employees of color. Design conferences and smaller events promise to do better every year after unveiling speaker panels with majority white speakers. And between magazines, podcasts and other media, the field of design can look like it's only created for and by a certain group of people."

Moreover, "because of the changing demographics in the U.S., there are fewer white students to enroll," White says. "Those slots have to be filled with paying students, so the acceptance of a different mix of students is logical. Though some of this evolution is dictated by a sense of fairness and 'doing good,' much of it is shaped by prevailing societal forces."

White, himself a middle-aged white man, is fully aware that his persona exemplifies the design establishment of 30 years ago, and sheds light on a new and hopeful graphic designer addressing a diverse community of the 21st century. "Design has always been a meritocracy; the quality of thinking and work is either in your portfolio or it doesn't exist. The opportunity for learning and professional advancement is far more available to anyone with talent and drive than ever before."

White closed our conversation noting, "With new audiences there must be a new message. The message has to be more inclusive."

As The Huffington Post article "A Study on the Changing Racial Makeup of 'The Next America'" states, "By 2042, so-called racial minority groups will make up the majority of the U.S. population. That's according to the U.S. Census Bureau's latest projection. Building on that, the Pew Research Center recently released an extensive study on the shifting demographics of race in our country, showing that within a century (from 1960 to 2060), white Americans will have gone from making up 85% of the population to comprising 43%. ... The number of Hispanic and black Americans will have grown substantially over that time period, together making up 45% of the 2060 population."

Further, the 2010 Census revealed that 9 million people now identify as multiracial—a 32% increase from the prior decade. This makes "multiracial" the fastest-growing demographic in the country. The same census reports that more minority babies were born than white babies. The shift has indeed shifted.

Concurring with today's political pundits, I contend that even the sole white male voter can't elect President 45 by themselves without a broad and diverse electorate.

On the whole, things are looking bright for design education and the designers who will make up the industry of tomorrow. ... But how is today's current business landscape handling things?

## A NEW CHALLENGE

Let me put a lens on the need for astute diverse design practitioners today. Kirsten West Savali's report on Gap's most recent image faux pas gives us great insight. Savali is a cultural critic and senior writer for *The Root*. Her April 2016 article "Gap Apologizes for Racially Charged GapKids x ED Ad" exemplifies the call for diverse corporate communications talent to speak to a broader audience.

Savali enlightens us: "One of the white children in the image is resting her arm on the head of the only black child featured, a distinctly unempowering pose that harkened back to an antebellum South in which black children were used as armrests and

footstools, and a present where black children are systematically devalued.”

Savali continues, “In this instance, image matters more than intent. And the lack of racial and cultural diversity at the executive level, which allowed that image to be approved and circulated, is one of the many ways in which institutional and systemic racism functions. ... Gap took responsibility and made the right decision. Hopefully, more corporations will take notice.” Sounds to me like Gap could use an art director of color.

CiCi Holloway is a global media human resource, diversity and inclusion senior executive and consultant for a variety of media, TV and entertainment groups. Holloway has a word for corporations like Gap and organizational entities that must find themselves up to the challenge of embracing design diversity initiatives in the 21st century:

“Diversity begets diversity, which in turn breeds innovation.

If we keep the door closed to diverse talent because of subconscious or unconscious bias, we are limiting our access to change, innovation, new solutions and ultimately financial success. Diversity of thought, perspectives, age, gender, experiences, cultures, race, etc., should be reflected in the images that we project to reach all consumers.

“As media executives, it is our responsibility to break the status quo. It is not enough to be in the room, but to have a ‘voice in the room.’ With over 40% of the U.S. identifying as non-white, and women already more than half of the population, our media outlets still remain homogenous for the most part. Missing voices will ultimately translate to missing perspectives from the media landscape.”

Holloway suggests that embracing the issue of diversity at every corner of business relations is just practical in today’s ever-changing marketplace. However, despite diverse demographics, education—and facts about a new audience in need of new content producers—things remain the same.



**Danita Albert**

Thirty years ago Holmes-Miller interviewed Albert.

At the time, Albert was working on her master’s in design at the Pratt Institute. “All along, I knew in the back of my mind that I needed more training, more of the basics,” she admitted in ’87. “But I needed a mentor, someone to tell me what I was doing wrong, and there simply aren’t enough visible black designers whom I could approach for help and advice.” Today, Albert is the senior art director at Boardroom Inc. in Stamford, CT.

“Many owners/department heads do themselves a disservice when they doubt [or] hold staunch belief systems of superiority over others and practice racially biased behavior against people of color. They miss out on advancing their own goals when they discount the talents and gifts of all the people they employ—or could employ. It is up to you, designer—especially you of color who have to prove yourself time and time again—to find the time, energy and finance to advance yourself professionally.”

Black designers should not still be missing in action. They should be creating, selling and designing the much-needed solutions for today’s global marketplace and community. This is the most ideal time for black designers to claim their seat at the Harkness table. We have a need, a supply and demand for addressing a more diverse community.

The AIGA responded to the 1987 clarion call to embrace advocacy and continue the dialogue of diversity, equality and inclusion as it relates to the graphic design industry. They published two articles: “Equal Opportunities? Minorities in Graphic Design” (1990) and “Why is Graphic Design 93% White?” (1991). In 1989, they also established the Minority Task Force to help end the marginalization of people of color. John Morning was the chair; a 1991 symposium convened.

Today, AIGA Executive Director Julie Anixter affirms the organization’s dedication to diversity as a core organizational value and mandate. “AIGA is committed to providing leadership and activating diversity and inclusion throughout the design industry,” she says.

The AIGA Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, originally championed and created by Antoinette Carroll, is now led by Obed Figueroa, AIGA national’s Diversity & Inclusion Resident. The Task Force’s mission is to encourage inclusion in design education, discourse and practice to strengthen and expand the relevance of design in all areas of society. Jacinda Walker, incoming chair of the AIGA Task Force, is currently completing her MFA in Design Research and Development at Ohio State University.

Walker’s thesis, “Design Journeys: Strategies for Increasing Diversity in Design Disciplines,” is full of the statistics that were lacking in my era. Though strides have been made, the challenges are still omnipresent: She references the U.S. Department of Labor, which reported an increase in the number of designers from 2015 to 2016, but a decrease in the number of black designers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that of 899,000 professional designers in the U.S., only 3.5% are black.

But Walker is working on solutions: “My research explores diversity in design disciplines and investigates 15 strategic ideas to expose African-American and Latino youth to design-related careers,” she writes.

Trying to help with the challenges of being isolated in today’s creative community, I keep up with those I have mentored. Recently, I found Danita Albert still busy designing since our first interview for my 1987 article. At that time, she had one main desire for her career: a mentor. Albert, like many others, felt that having an adviser is mandatory for success in the design world. Today I find her feeling exactly the same way;

## ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Read Cheryl D. Holmes-Miller’s original 1987 Print piece, “Black Designers: Missing In Action,” at [www.printmag.com/summer-16](http://www.printmag.com/summer-16).



### Anthony M. McEachern

McEachern is chairman of the Department of Art and an associate professor of design at Howard University. He teaches courses in advertising design, digital media arts, web design and creative business. While studying as an undergraduate at Howard University, McEachern stumbled across what he calls “an inspirational document composed on a typewriter in the late 1980s.” Serendipitously, this was a handout Holmes-Miller had written years ago, one that McEachern says “planted the seed” for his MFA thesis, doctoral research and dissertation theory titled “McEachern Model for the Successful Obtainment of Industry Readiness, Preparedness and Leadership for African American Millennial Media and Art Design Students.”

“My personal quest is to make relevant the integration of visual arts, technology, business and communications,” he says. “This, I believe, is one solution to the bigger problem and it can be achieved through the development of educational programs that streamline the processes for businesses, institutions and organizations while enriching our diverse society.”

being alone and not having a mentor remains a critical issue for the black designer.

For three decades now, black designers have reached out to me with the same concerns. “Ms. Miller, black designers do exist; we are here. But we are isolated.” I continually offer the same inspiration: “Guys, I analyzed the problem when I was a young woman. I’m in my seasoned baby boomer years now—you guys go and be the solution! It’s your time to do things I could never do. If a racially ambiguous, white-looking, black-of-another-color woman, hiding her mixed Asian multiracial-ness, can sell design against the odds after the Civil Rights era as a black woman, you can too with verve!”

Thirty years of inquiries have required answering countless questions: “How *did* you do it?” Developing my own design firm was my solution to any lack of opportunity I sensed from trying to practice as a black designer in New York. I succeeded practicing design with a secret recipe: my business acumen, a few strategic plans and my husband’s business prowess. Phillip M. Miller, an MBA, remains a quintessential corporate executive—an SVP credit card industry strategist. Together, we had a template, an application and a network to create our design business. A high regard to design management and a keen understanding of the Corporate 1,000 organizational structure gave us what we needed to create design opportunities nationally from a New York City base.

My husband strikes at what is perhaps the heart of the solution today: “While the hue of the country has changed, the funding sources are still owned and controlled by the former majority,” he says. “The new palette must own the income statement and balance sheet and not just be salaried. Owning power is essential toward advancing corporate sensitivities and developing diverse sensibilities in the marketplace.”

Back then, I used influential, affluent corporate referrals to develop a client base and massaged our corporate network every waking moment. Creating business opportunities gave me the power to control my design destiny. I was confident and embraced the challenge of defying the odds. My greatest design support was to myself; I believed that I was a great designer and my gift was needed, but I had to master the cold call.

I had a deep desire to let everyone know that I was on the turf—not just playing design, but winning the game of it. I was crazy competitive, making sure I had all the education I could get. I kept an honest paper trail of business endeavors. I entered every contest I could afford. I submitted entries over and over again. I delivered my projects on time, and priced them competitively. I taught graphic design classes and lectured. I judged contests. Simply put, I worked extremely hard to compete against incredible odds. And now I always stop for others to be the design mentor I never had.

## A NEW FUTURE

Black designers are here, on the scene. What is missing is the black designers’ PR presence in competitions, conferences, board seats, industry commentary, the education realm and so on. They are indeed in action, but still missing from our full view.

The more things change, the more they remain the same. But I dare say, as things remain the same and in spite of society’s paradigm shift, the black designer can be the advocate for change—the solution that is so needed today. Black graphic designers have great opportunity to fill an incredible void caused by a changing American platform, palette and demographic. It’s time to be the solution; it’s time to be seen, designing the solution now.

When in doubt, I offer my favorite quote; I offered it in 1987 and it remains my personal mantra for transcending obstacles to success:

“I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he/she has overcome while trying to succeed. Looked at from this standpoint, I almost reach the conclusion that often the Negro boy/girl’s birth and connection with an unpopular race is an advantage, so far as real life is concerned. With few exceptions, the Negro youth must work harder and must perform his/her task even better than a white youth in order to secure recognition. But out of the hard and unusual struggle through which he/she is compelled to pass, he/she gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race.” —*Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington ■

Cheryl D. Holmes-Miller is an award-winning communication designer and new media strategist, theologian and clergy woman, writer, author and lecturer. Speaking to the nations of Multiracial Multiethnic Diversity, Equality and Inclusion, her 21st-century voice resounds throughout the Americas and the Asian Pacific Islander, African and West Indian diasporas.