



Authenticity x Design: Communicating Across (sub) Cultures

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1:30 PM

ANTONIO GARCIA: I wanted to say thanks first to RGD and everyone for showing up. When I was contacted to speak I was pretty honored and thrilled and I told my friend about it and he's like, "but it's about accessibility, you don't know anything about that." And I was like he's right, I don't. But the cool thing when it was explained to me was that they were looking to broaden the definition of accessibility to be more inclusive, to include things like cultural relevance and ethnography, which I do know a lot about. So that's why I'm here and before I start I wanted to say that this orientation, mine today, is about changing definitions. I think it's ironic that when designers hear the word accessibility the first thing that comes to mind is limitations. Accessibility and accessible design is a challenge but not because doing so is complicated. It's definitely complex but it's a challenge because it means changing how we work, how we think, how we related to one another. So this orientation is about changing how we define ourselves as people and as designers. So it's about broadening our job title to include roles like observer, explorer, investigator and ethnographer.

Authenticity is universal currency, authenticity matters to everyone and can be seen and sensed by anyone. Our lives need more authenticity and so does the design industry. Authenticity is absolutely key to outstanding design. Everyone talks about what makes

good design. It's semantics but I kind of feel like good design becomes the standard. And it should be even better than that. It should be outstanding design. So nothing is more critical, especially when you're talking about communicating across cultures.

Communicating across cultures – or for cultures other than the ones we identify with personally – requires research and understanding. We can no longer sustain ourselves just being designers, right? There is this global marketplace that needs our input and our perspective and our help. To work in that space we must elevate ourselves to something new – to communicators, educators and translators of brands, of ethos and of messages. We have to find better ways of connecting. We must design more personally, transparently and honestly. And remember when you call them your target, your audience or the end-user, they are first and foremost people right? And they have histories, traditions, their own habits and their own perceptions and cultures.

My name is Antonio García and I'm a strategist, writer and brand consultant for the industries of design and innovation. I live in Chicago with my girlfriend and her blind Siamese cat – that's my connection to differently-abled individuals. I love rolling sushi and telling stories. My favourite international cities are Bangkok, Berlin, Delhi, Tokyo and of course, Toronto. I've been designing for over 10 years and working as a writer and strategist for about half that time. My work has focused primarily on branding, with an emphasis on sustainability, social justice, authenticity and youth culture. I'm also the Art Director for the AIGA Centre for Cross-Cultural Design.

AIGA is the professional association of U.S. designers. It's very similar in scope to RGD. AIGA Centre for Cross-Cultural Design (XCD) was established in 2003 to foster greater communication between designers across cultures, as well as a better understanding of interwoven experience of design and culture in our lives. Essentially AIGA XCD encourages U.S. designers to think beyond our borders.

Their natural and cultural borders in order to create compelling, engaging and relevant work responsive to today's diverse audiences.

There's a definite business case to be made for cross-cultural consideration and design accessibility. As technology shrinks our planet and multichannel media delivers new worlds faster and faster, designers, developers, strategists, writers, we all need to work together and bridge this gap between insular design thinking and the requisite worldview.

I don't know if you read Monocle Magazine, but I'm a big fan, and Monocle teamed up with Star Alliance (the global airline network) to create this simple insert into one of the magazines. And it was called "A Global Guide to Business Etiquette". The booklet contained 25 tips for international business networking. I'd like to know if you think number 4 is true: "In Canada, drinking alcohol is not usual during business lunches. Stick to water unless your host suggests otherwise." Is that true? I don't know. Yeah? So they got it right. In any case, the guide opened with this statement: "When traveling for international business, cultural and local knowledge smoothes the way for mutual understanding and strong commercial relationships." When I read that I thought, nearly the same can be said for design. When designing for international clients, cultural and local knowledge smoothes the way for mutual understanding and strong brand experiences. My point is, as designers, when we're aware, when we're exposed or when we actively seek this knowledge of the world around us, we're going to be more successful navigating international business relations and the differences, large and small. So this idea is applicable in lots of ways, you don't have to just have international clients for this to make sense.

The problem that I think is lots of people consider race when they're defining culture or discussing cross-cultural design. But culture actually has nothing to do with skin colour or biological characteristics. Culture is learned behavior. This depiction of "The Five

Races of Man” appeared in Victor Perard’s 1928 book Anatomy and Drawing. He was an instructor and worked at Cooper Union in New York. I think it’s interesting the lack of detail found in the Asian and Malayan faces. Maybe as a New Yorker he saw plenty of whites and blacks and first-nations people but the way he illustrated the rest are vague. They’re line drawings, really really simple. And also the Caucasian race is this classical, Greco-Roman sort of thing. And everyone has a hat or something going on that is costume-ey that identifies a race because they have this particular hat or headdress on. That’s also inaccurate.

At the start I explained that this orientation was about expanding our definitions and our roles and our minds so when we expand our definition of culture to include things like gender, tradition, religion, language, family, sexuality, economics... That’s when we uncover powerful ways to connect with people, beyond what colour their skin is or what language they may speak. This is how we’re going to participate in this global community and we’re going to work together in this global marketplace. So society and culture are incredibly complex. Thankfully ethnography offers a way to talk about some of these things and make sense out of both. It lets us see beyond our preconceptions and immerse ourselves in a world of others. Most importantly, it allows us to see patterns of behavior in a real world context. These are patterns that we can understand both rationally and intuitively.

Here’s some basic terminology just so we’re on the same page. Throwing around these kind of complex ideas like culture and society, ethnography and cross-cultural design, I just want to take a second to talk about the nomenclature around these words and their definitions.

Generally speaking, cultural anthropology is the study of human culture and society. One goal of cultural anthropology is to understand how cultural change works so that we can predict it and

perhaps control and change in positive and productive ways. Society is a group of people dependent on each other for survival and well being. More than ever, transportation, mobile devices and the Internet and all that stuff is pushing societies outside their original, geographical locations. It's no longer specific. Societies are becoming increasingly global. So if you don't have a cross-cultural issue now, you probably will eventually.

And the last one is culture. Culture is learned behavior like I said before. It's how we adapt to our environments and give meaning to our lives. Culture and society have more to do with our work as designers than anything else. Culture and society shape everything. Technology, fashion, art, music, cinema, literature – all these things that we look to for inspiration – they are all activated by and within culture and society. So to be successful, to be really sustainable, we have to have impact in this space and remain authentic in both our lives and our design work, which takes us to the concepts and practices of authenticity and ethnography.

Does anybody listen to hip-hop? Hip-hop fan? Somebody back there? Anybody? Name any rapper, any good rapper. Mos Def? Somebody said Mos Def. If you asked Mos Def what authenticity means he would probably say something about “keepin’ it real”, right? This idea permeates hip-hop more than any other musical genre. But this idea of keeping it real, I mean it's the basis of so many rap songs but more than that, everyone wants to “keep it real.” Everyone wants to be authentic. It's funny because rappers always talk about wanting to “keep it real” and all this stuff and they want to sell out arenas and they want to sell out in the stores but they never want to be called a sell-out. It's weird.

Authenticity is more than “keepin’ it real.” Look at Hammer and Vanilla Ice in 1990. They were trying really hard to “keep it real.” And look at all the geeky rich record executives behind them, so uptight, it's really corny. But simply put, authenticity comes from

the heart. Authenticity occurs at the intersection of motivation and meaning. So when you're motivated by a selfless purpose and you take meaningful action then you are living authentically. That's an authentic life. Authenticity can be found any time the purity of the intent matches the positivity of the impact (if that makes sense). So because it's ultimately felt and sensed and intuitively picked up it makes it hard to define and I'm probably doing a really bad job of it. But when you're talking about business, the commercialization of an idea or a product, authenticity is even more abstract, it's even harder to work with. So for me authenticity is more than "keepin' it real." I think that authenticity is about keepin' it right.

When it comes to design and business, authenticity is a brand's most critical currency. Brands can't hide behind hype anymore. As soon as someone feels betrayed, abandoned, let down by a product or company, what's the first thing they do? They go to a blog, they go to Twitter and they complain about it to the whole world. There's no holding it back and that has so many companies really scared. The coolest thing about what we do as designers and the power we have over the situation, we have the ability to strip away the BS and reveal our communicative thing for what it is: the core values, the company ethos, the passion behind the thing. But no matter how hard we try design can't give a thing meaning. We can only evoke meaning from something. So authenticity for design and business requires transparency, honest story telling and cultural relevance.

A few years ago I saw Paul Tew, Creative Director for global brand Converse, speak at an AIGA Business of Design session. The moderator asked if it was becoming more difficult for him to relate to the brand as he grew older. Paul replied, "I'm not cool, but I know who is." And he can say that because he's spent so long in places like MTV and Nike studying and working directly with youth subcultures. At the time he was collaborating with a small group of young French kids - that's how he explained it - on essentially what was going to be Converse's next brand strategy. It was like six skate-

boarders in France were deciding everything that Converse was about to do. And that kind of trust he called “energy marketing”. He talked about owning his “Converse-ness,” your brand essence. Understanding your audiences so well that you own that space. You own your “Converse-ness”. Converse has remained fresh and timeless even as the brand grew to these global proportions. And it’s because people like Paul see themselves as brand custodians. They’re curating a particular culture and in this case it’s this culture of cool. And this culture exists independently from the brand, independently from its success and universal appeal and broad customer base. When Nike bought Converse they understood this so they didn’t really mess with it. What they did was just build on it and they implemented their ID program. If you’re familiar with the Nike shoe, you can customize a number of models online and have them shipped right to you. So they added that to Converse and what that did was it allowed people to buy into this Converse brand identity that they already knew and loved but now they can put their own personal twist on it. It was classic product shared in a personal way.

Let’s talk about ethnography for a second. Ethnography is human-centered research. It informs design by revealing a deep understanding of people and how they make sense of their world. When applied to design, ethnography helps create more compelling, innovative solutions that actually connect with people. Ethnography is a tool for better design. Good design connects with people. But if you want to make outstanding design, we need to build on those connections as designers. We need to inspire, provoke, validate, entertain, delight and provide utility for people. To really connect we need to be compassionate. We have to have empathy for our audiences. We need to understand the relationships between what we produce and the meaning those products have for other people in their lives. And finally ethnography is a systematic process. Useful ideas can be extracted from casual observation but really powerful insights come when we dig in deep, this kind of rigorous analysis

of findings. It's everything from audio, video, photos, field notes – any of this contextual data can be used in ethnography and it's all right if they're rough and unpolished. You don't need to bring a film crew out and create a documentary just because you are interviewing a bunch of people. The whole idea is that it's visually compelling and it's meaningful because it's not forced or staged. A way to think about ethnography is it's like embedded journalism. It's like field reporting from the middle of the Amazon rainforest to downtown Toronto and it's reality TV and it's all rolled into one powerful, unscripted discovery. Ethnography is real life.

LiAnne Yu is a cultural anthropologist and she said, “Ethnography is observing people's behavior in their own environment so that you can get a holistic understanding of their world. One that you can intuit at a deeply personal level.” So ethnography is this research method based on observing people in their natural environment instead of a formal research setting. If you want to understand what makes a teenager pick up skateboarding, you can bring her into a sterile laboratory and grill her with questions and interrogate her for the day, or you can spend a few weeks at the skate park she goes to and observe her interacting with her friends, trying to land tricks, that kind of thing.

So ethnography can impact your next client project and collaboration and you're probably saying, this sounds very politically correct and that's fine but I don't have international clients or I'm an in-house designer, I already know my clients, how is this relevant to me? But changing our definitions again and looking at some cool things that ethnography can do will show you how it will empower and equip you as a designer, regardless of the work you do and the clients you have.

Globe trot. Ethnography enables you to create for the global marketplace. Ethnography shows you the big world picture and how all the pieces, products, technology and design come together.

So it's branding, it's user experience, it's packaging. These are all channels for storytelling. So looking at the difference between the Japanese McDonalds website and the Australian, totally different experiences. Different size, product shot is different, but the brands are essentially the same. The products haven't changed. So when we examine local tastes, when we find what's specific to a culture, that's when we can add it to a brand experience. Now we're dealing with something new and exciting and a different opportunity and another way we can talk to people. Things remain globally consistent and then become locally relevant. By the way if you go to the U.S. or Canadian website for McDonalds, there's no food photography. I think they're trying to hide something from us. Look how nice the Japanese site is. So orderly. This is the Mighty Angus. What's funny about the Japanese site is they're really promoting this "The Big American" and it's so embarrassing. There's a New York, Vegas, L.A. and the Texas and they have this little flash interactive game and there's this little cowboy and he looks like George Bush.

So next one is find God. What I mean by that is culture is learned behavior. It's how we adapt to our environments and give meaning to our lives like I said before. Ethnography provides rich incites into how people make sense of their own world. For example, people can make certain places sacred. There's a really beautiful cathedral there and it's an image of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. And the bottom image is of a ghost bike memorial on the corner of a busy intersection a block away from my apartment. This intersection had no meaning before Mr. Medina died there. Now his family will remember that corner forever. And by examining the artifacts and the rituals that reflect people's lives, we learn what they value and hold sacred.

Get mores. Social mores. Ethnography reveals ways in which cultural norms shape perceptions. I live in Humboldt Park, which is Chicago's Puerto Rican neighborhood. I am Puerto Rican and the Latinos there embrace their values and they seek ways to accentuate them.

So the mannequin, they mirror that. The mannequins don't have anything from the waist up. They are just big-butt mannequins to show denim off on the street. Then you go up to the north side of Chicago, on Devon Avenue, and it's the complete opposite. It's full of sari shops and the traditional Indian fashion minimizes the body. You have this total opposite in presentation and of course, the role and use of colour affects things too. But by studying how people express themselves through style and ornamentation and fashion, you gain insight into how they define themselves within their community or society. Understanding culture mores ensures brands and products resonate with consumers instead of offend them.

Zero in. Ethnography helps us learn how to communicate more effectively with people, in a language and way they actually understand. So I know U.S. healthcare has a lot to learn from Canada's, but poorly designed documents like these are not just limited to just insurance companies and hospital invoices. By default, documents like these create confusion, anxiety, panic, when they arrive in your mailbox. But when you observe how people process this information, you can understand what words and symbols evoke certain reactions. We also discover whether information is missing all together.

And the last one is dig deep. Ethnography highlights differences between what people say they do and what they actually do. So if you pay a bunch of people to discuss their grocery shopping or their eating habits and someone started the conversation with, "I only buy organic food from Whole Foods. All I eat is fresh produce." Even if the guy next to you was going to say, "I eat Ed Horton's everyday," or something like that, he's not going to anymore. He's going to change what he said because he's embarrassed now. Who just went first sounded really healthy so even if his freezer is full of prepared frozen foods, he's not going to say that. Which is why I think focus groups don't really work. Somebody told me that they don't have Hot Pockets in Canada, is that right? They do? Okay good. Well not good. Hot Pockets are terrible. But I wasn't sure if

that image would be culturally relevant. Anyway, in focus groups there's this sort of thing that happens where leaders emerge and they kind of dominate the conversation and they steer it in a particular way and everybody sort of dives in and follows suit. And you're finding out how people answer questions in this really controlled environment and it's just not realistic. I think people are too familiar with focus groups and how they work. So, by observing what people actually do, maybe asking a bunch of people if you can visit them when they put together their grocery list and they go grocery shopping and it's a more intimate, one on one thing and its conversational discussion kind of thing. It's going to be totally different than getting a bunch of people in a room sort of bragging about how healthy they eat. So when you do that, you learn about the choices people make and how they perceive and filter their own actions and as a result you can create images and design and meaning for people that connects with their emotions and their intentions.

I want to wrap this up so there is time to chat. I don't want this to be totally abstract and you walk away and think, "Oh that was really cool but how do I do this?" So here are some simple ideas about how you can apply it in your work today.

Dive in. Start early. Be flexible. Using these new definitions and understanding of culture and society and authenticity and ethnography, we can define the problem better and we can determine the cross-cultural issues if there are any. When you're printing out your creative brief, that's the point that you start. Not later when you go back through and you're like how do I make this right for this one audience and it's too late. So the idea is to make this part of your research, to include ethnography in those conversations from the very beginning. That's when you're going to have time to identify the people who are most likely positioned to shed light on your issues, whatever this cross-cultural thing you're trying to deal with and answer those questions for you. So remember that audience targets shift. So you can think that you're talking to a certain person

or a client comes to you and says, “this is exactly who our guy is.” But you have to be ready to adapt and tailor your methods because a week into that process you realize it’s totally not right. So “life in beta” is awesome. I think everything should stay in beta all the time because it means we always have room to make it better. As soon as the beta thing comes off it’s like, well I guess it done and its perfect and I think that isn’t accurate. Nobody nails it perfect every time. Designers have to be ready for anything when it starts in the research. They have to be proactive and at the same time, responsive to what they find.

Use variety. Run pilot tests. Be patient. You have to employ multiple methods for this to work. Interviews, snapshots, video, it all comes together. There’s a studio in Chicago called gravitytank and they describe their ethnographic methodology as reconnaissance instead of research. It’s a little bit different way of thinking. You’re looking for the best techniques to immerse you in other people’s lives and that’s going to be different every time. It should be wide ranging. So you can do self-documenting, where you ask the participants to track their own experiences in a blog or video or collage or notes. Or it can be observation with a manned camera. So you’re just having a normal conversation and then recordings are made as invisible as possible. But you have to prepare for these things. You have to run pilot tests. You’re not looking for the right questions so much as the right way to act and interact. So be patient because meaningful insights don’t come quickly. It’s really about slowing down and using all of your senses. I think that just in general, a rebellious pursuit of knowledge is really important for design.

Number three and there are no sub points to this because it’s really important. Bring your clients in on this idea. This isn’t going to work every time. You don’t always have budgets to do these things or you may have a client that’s adamant - there’s no reason to spend on research, I already gave you my notes, this is all we have to talk about, let’s just move forward. You have to pick your battles

but if you get them involved early, you'll have a chance. If you wait until later and you do it sort of secretly (this is just some research we're going to do on the side) it will be impossible to get them to buy into it. They will think it's a total waste of resources. So you have to work collaboratively with them from the beginning. That's the only way to ensure this is going to work. So it's hard to sometimes get clients to understand the value of design. Getting them to understand the value of research can be even more challenging. There's another studio in Chicago called Conifer Research and they encourage their clients to be part of field reporting. They train them and educate them just like they would their researchers and ethnographers and the client comes with sometimes. But you have to be prepared to deal with the client when they see the ugly truth. They have this particular idea about the user and then you bring them out and you show them and it's totally not right. They freak out and they panic and they can't understand. But when you bring them in from the beginning and you use things like video, really media-rich stuff that you can't really refute, can't argue, you're going to get them on your side faster.

Stay organized. Tell stories. Share insights. This process is time consuming. Analyzing data is time consuming so as soon as you get back you have to dive into it and process it and digest it because if you don't do it immediately, it sort of goes away. So you want to create memorable stories and thoughts and catalogue them in a way where you can look for patterns and instances that help you connect the dots. Outcomes can include design principles, models, personas - something I used to do a lot at Firebelly, where you interview a ton of people and synthesize them into a unique point of view and you give those people a name and you give them an image that represents them and they sort of become the avatar for a larger group and it's easier to talk about with clients when they have a face and a name. Even if it's not real, it's all based on things that you found that are real. It's weird because you're trying to

connect emotional, experiential things to business and strategy and it's a big deal. So the story of the design is just as important as the design itself. You have to design your research when you present it. Things have to be visually explained wherever they can be. You're trying to come up with shareable, tellable stories. You want your business to own it's "Converse-ness" or whatever it's "ness" is. That takes work to inspire ownership.

The last one is be curious. Be worldly. Be inspired. All the ideas and techniques in this orientation require that you stay fresh and inspired and creative and that's not always easy to do. I suggest reading. Personally, that's where I find a lot of information. There's a really good book, *Design Research Methods and Perspectives*. It's all written from the designer's perspective, which is great. Travel - consider a volunteer vacation or volunteerism (sometimes it's called). That's how I went to Thailand was through a program like that called *Globe Aware*. So instead of going and doing the touristy things and stuff, I was driven out to this remote farm and I just helped and I spent over a week with a Thai family just hanging out. It was awesome. It was better than any trip I've ever taken in my life. I'd be happy to tell you all about that stuff. I got to hang out with all these cool, young, Buddhist student monks in their temple. How do you arrange that? You don't do that on your own by booking through Expedia, you know?

And also collaborating with others, especially when they're different than you. It can be a different discipline. Maybe you don't know anything about photography so you make sure to work with a photographer or illustrator or sculptor. You push yourself to do this and it doesn't have to happen for work. We get into this mode where all the stuff we do is about the projects that we have or the timelines or budgets we're restricted by. But find a designer or someone you respect or someone on the Internet and shoot them an email, ask them if they want to collaborate on something. They probably would. Everyone is dying to do cool stuff and complain that the

client they have sucks. Then find work that you like to do and make it happen outside of work, right?

Last thing. In 2006, AIGA and Adobe got together and they started this giant research endeavor to find the designer of 2015. It was a big deal. And they engaged 2500 experts in our field and they published their findings last year I think. And of the 13 core competencies that they listed - these are skills beyond today's scope, what we're going to need to survive in 2015 - 10 of them could be directly connected to cross-cultural design and ethnographic research. And they listed 5 broad scope trends that are going to change the industry. Every single one of them involved a combination of global perspective, social media and/or cultural identity and accessibility. Accessibility is forward thinking. Ethnography is innovation. And design's BFF is social science.

The content for this came from a whole lot of places besides me. So I wanted to say thanks to the AIGA XCD, Cheskin in California, Conifer Research, Google Images for half the stuff that's in there, gravitytank (where I consult currently), Firebelly Design (a socially responsible studio in Chicago), Monocle Magazine and The Secret Handshake. You can find out more about AIGA XCD at xcd.aiga.org. I'd love to stay in touch so please visit my blog amgarcia.com and you can text 'ANTONIO' to 50500 and you'll get all of my contact information because I don't have 100 business cards today.

Thanks.