

Beyond Hired Hands: Black Design and Tech Experts As Thought Partners for Social Change

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As a Black professional, you may know that feeling of being “the only one”. It’s a space many of The Talented Tenth occupy, especially as they continue on in their careers. Some of them try to break out of that feeling by banding together towards a common good, such as supporting social impact initiatives or meeting with companies and institutions to address systemic inequities. Historically, Black communities have thrived around these shared interests, and in turn, have produced some of the country’s first Black major media companies, HBCUs, progressive political movements and politicians, and even its first Black president.



A young Barack and Michelle Obama in their Chicago home.

Source: ©Mariana Cook 1996

But when it's time for Black designers and tech professionals to be included, we become an afterthought – a means to an end when they need a logo or a flyer or something simple done on the Web. And when it comes to being seen as social peers for important initiatives, we are instead regarded as non-factors in the conversation. We've seen this when former NAACP head Ben Jealous speaks at Twitter HQ and no Black employees are invited. We've seen this when Black lawmakers breathlessly call for more diversity in Silicon Valley yet ignore existing initiatives that are already making progress.

There appears to be a gap between Black design and tech professionals versus Black professionals in other fields. How did this happen, and what can we do to get out of it and bridge the divide?

"If I said to you on a casual day 'Let's talk about the water crisis in Flint,' that's not a conversation that most people want to have." says Lisa Babb, assistant director at Museum of Design Atlanta. "If I put that on a very soft quilt using iridescent colors and threads and spiraled it into a circle where you see that it started as one specific incident and continued to grow into this almost uncontrollable spiral, it's a more accessible topic. And it's something I can talk about with different audiences instead of just the believers."

"There's a disconnect between who might work at a tech company and that person may not look like us." says a Black female tech worker in Silicon Valley who wanted to remain anonymous. "My older Black neighbor hates tech in general. If I said I was a doctor or a lawyer, she'd be more impressed. It's very strange. We're allowed to be successful in only certain areas. I don't think tech has joined the other [prestigious industries]."



Former President of the NAACP Ben Jealous speaking at the Fairness Matters Forum sponsored by Twitter, c. 2015.

Source: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The San Francisco Chronicle

“The fields of design and tech are amoral; they are tools.” says Anthony Scott, a director of economic development in Baltimore. “I would probably engage a designer or tech person near the beginning of my work after getting some general values or principles and goals from the community. After the brainstorming, I would want to translate that brainstorm into something visual that people can react to and revise as needed. This is especially true if the general goal or project requires getting people to buy into a common vision. In order to do that, people have to see something that they can react to.”

Graphic design and web development aren’t just utilities for the cause; they can also be spaces for social thought and political work. Inclusion advocates for tech and design are shortchanging the very people they wish to include when they don’t also encourage them to be active thought leaders with respect to political and social change. We cannot continue to say that Black girls should learn to code when ongoing projects around AI are social, political, and ethical conversations they must be a part of.

As Kimberly Bryant, executive director of Black Girls Code once said, “it’s about teaching them more than just about how to write a line of code, but how to use this thinking process and this design methodology to create a different reality for themselves in whatever part of life that is.”



Bryan C. Lee facilitates a design thinking workshop at Colloqate.

Source: ©Colloqate.

There are Black leaders in design and tech who leading and deepening paths toward social change. [Bryan C. Lee](#) of [Colloqate](#) in New Orleans, LA uses [paper monuments](#) to ask a community what a new narrative about their city should look like after the recent removal of Confederate monuments. [Antionette Carroll](#) of [Creative Reaction Lab](#) in St. Louis, MO also uses design thinking strategies to empower young people to address immediate social injustices.

When asked about [increasing diversity in tech](#), Bryant said, “My optimism comes from the folks [design and tech] that are doing the work in diversity. If you ask if my optimism lies in the industry, it does not. I’m more optimistic about our ability as changemakers both inside and outside these companies to make them get it.”

Bryant also brought up the pattern of creative firms and tech companies inviting Black influencers and celebrities from other fields to address their employees about diversity and inclusion, a PR stunt which lets these businesses off the hook for resolving longstanding internal issues.

“[Twitter] invited someone from a very vocal and very high-profile person from the Black Lives Matter social movement to come and speak. And a lot of the Black techies, myself included, were quite surprised by that. Because we were like, not that we thought that they didn’t mean well, but it was interesting to us because we’re like, ‘Wait a minute. We’re right here. And no one came to ask us what you should do to change your issues in diversity.’ But you go across the country and bring someone that’s working on a very valid movement and I think there are parallels. But your issue here directly relates to all these people around you that can help you solve the problem.”

DeRay McKesson delivers the closing keynote at Black in Design 2017 at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA.

Black designers and coders can do more than make cool logos and troubleshoot code. Yes, we spend late nights in hackathons or slaving over last-minute design projects, but when we leave those spaces, we are still Black people who are well aware of police brutality, income inequality, and yes, the lack of diversity in our fields.

In short, non-design and tech Black professionals should not confuse a lack of awareness with a lack of existence. Rethinking the value of Black graphic designers and technologists is crucial to no longer seeing them as hired hands. Centering concerns around a lack of diversity in the design and tech fields without including Black design and tech professionals will only end up perpetuating the very problem they are attempting to solve.