

Black representation and Information Design: an analysis of the infographic series “Some babies are born black”

Representatividade negra e design da informação: análise da série de infográficos “Some babies are born black”

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This article presents an analysis of the infographic series “Some babies are born black” by illustrator Chidiebere Ibe, having as core purpose reflections on information design, Black representation, and contemporary design. To this end, bibliographical reviews were conducted, developing studies on the concepts of information design and Black representation and outlining criteria to understand the construction of the series as a positive case of representation in contemporary design.

*design da Informação,
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Esse artigo apresenta uma análise da série de infográficos “Some babies are born black” do ilustrador Chidiebere Ibe, objetivando produzir reflexões acerca do design da informação, da representatividade negra e do design contemporâneo. Para tanto, realizou-se revisões bibliográficas, desenvolvendo estudos sobre conceitos do design da informação e representatividade negra, apontando critérios para entender a construção da série enquanto caso positivo de representação no contexto do design contemporâneo.

1 Introduction

Information design is a field of study devoted primarily to organizing information with the objective of producing clear and objective communication pieces. However, such organization is often linked to image composition, so that in working within information design one does not only confront operational and technical demands but also finds opportunities to reflect on the representations of images – and especially on their impacts in contemporary society.

In his book intitled *Design the Pluriverse*, Colombian author Arturo Escobar proposes reflections on contemporary design that are inseparably tied to the core issues raised by social and cultural movements. He criticizes neoliberal capitalism, consumerism, and the individualism that emerge from this economic model as well as political reforms related to power disputes, territory, and military weaponry (Escobar, 2018). This critique was inspired by the organized battles of indigenous peoples, Black communities, peasants,

and marginalized urban groups – particularly in Latin America – who mobilize today not only to defend their resources and territories but the totality of their ways of living (Escobar, 2018).

In the history of Brazilian design, it is possible to identify a series of issues stemming from capitalism, public policies, and coloniality that have marked both professional design practice and design education. In the article *Colonização e ensino do design* (Colonization and design education), Barbosa and Fonseca (2020) systematically demonstrate how colonization still permeates popular imagination currently and how it impacts Brazilian design and its teaching, causing dependency on industrial traditions at the expense of reflective and critical processes (Barbosa; Fonseca, 2020).

Within such context, Escobar (2018) introduces the concept of “design for transitions,” linking theories and practices of contemporary design with today’s political, social, and cultural transformations, while positioning contemporary design as an ontological practice (Escobar, 2018). He poses the questions: If design exists for the real world, what is that world? What kind of design is it? And what is real?

However, nurturing the potential of design for transitions requires a significant shift from functionalist and rationalist design and industrial traditions from which it emerged (and still operates) toward some sort of rationality and practices that are aligned to the relational dimension of life (Escobar, 2018, p. 10).

It is within this reorientation context that the central idea of this article emerges: a proposal for the analysis of a design product that takes into account concepts of information design as well as contemporary and decolonial design.

The object of analysis is an infographic series chosen for its popularity in information design, precisely because it is part of the everyday visual landscape for most people. Moreover, the infographic can be viewed as a cognitive artifact that, through texts and images, can convey a series of ideas and representations that may give light to critiques, claims, and questions associated with political and social movements.

The infographic series “Some Babies Are Born Black” by Nigerian doctor and illustrator Chidiebere Ibe can be seen as an example of how to foster the potential of design for transitioning, as it enables reflections on aspects of information design linked to matters of Black representation in contemporary society.

Although the creator of the series identifies himself as a doctor and illustrator rather than as a designer, the construction of the infographics reveals several technical and procedural characteristics typical of an information design product. In addition, the series highlights a powerful Black representational perspective, as it provides scientific illustrations that serve as Ibe’s response to research indicating that only 16% of the images in medical textbooks and articles feature non-white representations.

Subsequently, studies on information design, Black representation, and contemporary (and decolonial) design are presented as conceptual

frameworks to be employed in the analysis of the infographics. The first objective is to understand how the infographics were built and which choices in the construction process relate to the theories and practices of information design. Secondly, the analysis seeks to identify matters relating to Black representation and how reflections on these can be enhanced through design processes – specifically from the perspective of contemporary and decolonial design.

2 Information design

According to Meirelles (2013), information design comprises the study of design processes which has, as primary aim, to inform. Within this definition, lies the infographic, which is widely used to present relationships and patterns of information that would be otherwise unnoticed or hard to understand without the aid of design and visual representation (Meirelles, 2013).

Carvalho and Aragão (2012, p. 166) define an infographic for design as an “artifact produced with the intention of communicating a message that is an interpretation of quantitative, spatial, narrative, and/or chronological data, visually contextualized through the integration of text, images, and/or shapes.” Thus, for effective communication of messages, working with infographics depends directly on cognitive processes: from the encoding of information (understanding meanings to compose a message) to decoding (interpreting the message to derive meanings) (Meirelles, 2013). It is therefore essential, while working with infographics, to understand the context of the information to be translated into visual strategies, ensuring comprehension of the central communication objectives and determining how to organize these pieces of information visually in accordance with those objectives.

Horn (1998) identifies the infographic as an artifact of visual language, since its fundamental elements (text and image) can undertake different meanings. According to Horn (1998), text and image can be analyzed on both syntactic and semantic levels. A syntactic analysis of infographics focuses on understanding their structural visual elements, how these elements interact, and how their configurations ensure efficient encoding and decoding of information. In this sense, clarity and objectivity in presenting these elements are essential, which ties closely with the organization of visual components to facilitate clear reading (Meirelles, 2013). This arrangement refers to the elements of visual language (point, line, shape, texture, color, etc.), its compositional relationships (proximity, distance, hierarchy), and its configuration through various visual techniques (balance, contrast, emphasis, etc.) (Dondis, 1997).

Regarding semantic analysis, Horn (1998) explains that it focuses on the functions of the visual elements (text and image) and its specific settings, aiming to determine what each element can communicate. Horn (1998) categorizes these functions as follows: indicating “who” (people and their qualities or descriptions), “what” (objects and their qualities or descriptions), “what is inside” (an interior view of objects

and/or structures), “where” (location), “when” (time indication), “how it works” (systematizing functioning), “how to do” (steps or procedure), “movement” (displacement and/or changes), “which” (emphasis on something), “examples” (to illustrate or highlight), “concepts” (patterns or ideas that might not be immediately perceived without representations), and “comparisons” (to encourage comparative reading of elements; in cases involving numerical data, this function may be quantitative).

Within this context, for the analysis of the infographic series, the above concepts were employed as categories and criteria. The first category concerns the syntactic approach to the elements, emphasizing clarity and objectivity in presenting information. The second category relates to the semantic approach and the various ways of organizing information in a manner that is consistent with its functions and the project’s objectives. Although these categories influence each other, their segregation promotes a deeper analysis.

3 Black representation

To discuss Black representation, it is essential to observe and critique the images that pervade society. hooks (2019) argues that the domination of images is one of the primary mechanisms through which white supremacists maintain power – a system established since slavery which devalues Black people. It is impossible to address racial issues without understanding the historical impact of slavery.

Quijano (2005) posits that before the era of the great oceanic explorations, the concept of “race” did not exist; distinctions among people were based solely on economic power. Once colonizers invaded new territories, it became necessary to institute a new form of power; for this purpose, racial domination was inserted into society. While slavery did exist before, it did not carry the hostile and devastating meaning that was later ascribed. Colonization created the concept of the Black person to ensure that the white could exist as the dominant figure within the colonial power structure, especially in labor contexts. In this way, a system of racial domination was enforced which, despite the end of colonial rule, continues to shape identities and societal structures.

Quijano (2005) introduces the term “Coloniality of Power,” which examines the lasting influence of colonization on contemporary society. hooks (2019) demonstrates how this concept blocks the visibility of Black individuals, who have historically been assigned to inferior positions, arguing that a white supremacist education system and racist media create a scenario in which many Black people come to believe that their lives are not complex enough to merit critical examination. One of the arenas hooks (2019) highlights is the representation of Blackness itself, which becomes particularly devastating when Black individuals realize that they lack control over their own images.

hooks (2019) further argues that it is necessary for white and non-white individuals to unite to transform images away from a colonizing perspective. She highlights that the representation of Blackness by white people has, in

contemporary times, become a commodity with no clear limits regarding how images are constructed. Thus, it is essential to critique these representations so that oppressive narratives are not perpetuated. Moreover, the author stresses that effecting change requires a readiness to take risks. Such argument was also raised by Sales (2023), who notes that many designers distance themselves from activist-design projects for fear of being negatively marked within the job market, thereby reinforcing European narratives.

Braga (2015) demonstrates how the image of Black women has long been associated with pejorative traits since the time of slavery – a spectacle crafted for European audiences. Schwarcz (2024) reinforces these issues and broadens the discussion by introducing the influence of eugenic science, which for years propagated the erroneous idea that Black people were genetically inferior – a notion disseminated particularly within academic circles and the medical field. This matter can be exemplified by Sojourner Truth's statement "Am I Not a Woman?", as presented by Akotirene (2019): "nobody ever helped me board carriages, nor jump over puddles of mud ... I had thirteen children and saw most of them sold to slavery" (Akotirene, 2019, p. 25). The author critiques the idea of a universal womanhood; as a Black woman, she was not awarded the same treatment as white women.

Thus, it becomes clear that the portrayal of Black women is subject to external influences which distort their self-perception and deny them control over their own narratives. For the purposes of this analysis, critical points such as Blackness, Black participation, and the consideration of a Black perspective have been identified.

4 Contemporary and decolonial design

Understanding contemporary design requires a journey through time to observe the characteristics that define this field. Design – as with the world at large – has been influenced by colonial practices that reinforced hegemonic epistemologies while excluding various cultures. Bonsiepe (2011), as cited by Montuori and Nicoletti (2021), argues that the discourse surrounding design reflects the interests of the economy, through which the globalized world exercises its hegemonies. Thus, the incorporation of contemporary design, or as Escobar (2018) phrases it, "Design for the Pluriverse," which criticizes universalism, aims to propose a world in which different forms of knowledge coexist with respect and autonomy (Escobar, 2018 as cited by Montuori & Nicoletti, 2021).

Design emerged during modern times, a period that radically transformed people's lives. Ways of thinking and acting were compelled to evolve under the influence of experts who intervened in everyday life, thereby altering cultural norms passed down through generations (Escobar, 2018). In this process, knowledge was no longer transmitted solely from within but also from external sources. Design played a significant role in shaping identities, as evidenced by Escobar's (2018) discussion of world fairs, which served as showcases for the technological and cultural innovations of their time. From this perspective, Escobar's reference to design as an ontological

practice becomes clear – the term itself addresses the construction of being. Moreover, design was especially influential during modern times, where it both erased and constructed new narratives, many of them linked to specific economic interests.

Manzini (2017) argues that design, in addition to solving problems, creates meaning, which supports Escobar's (2018) assertion of design's ontological nature. Meaning is not solely embedded in the final artifacts produced by design processes but also arises from how these artifacts are perceived by people. In other words, design projects must reflect contextual appropriateness. If formal design rooted in European traditions is disseminated globally without adapting to local contexts, it risks becoming a tool that reinforces European hegemony.

It is important to emphasize that abandoning European influence is not the goal; rather, it should be recognized as one approach among many (Mareis & Paim, 2020 as cited by Torretta, Clark & Redström, 2024). Changes must be constructed by embracing diversity and particularities of each context and its identities. In other words, paraphrasing Krippendorff (2006), one needs to understand the "ecology" of communities and their discourses to construct what is truly important for them.

Sales (2023) observes that designers are often taught to create for a single audience without cultivating a critical perspective toward other cultures. The author notes that Black designers, in particular, are compelled to set aside their cultural references to produce designs that conform to mainstream expectations. Harris (2022) further highlights that the lack of Black representation in the field can leave many Black students feeling isolated. Consequently, contemporary design must provide new tools and approaches for the field.

Montuori and Nicoletti (2021) analyze various aspects of design, such as its reliance on a universal language that does not consider local expressions. In this context, rigid methodologies and techniques do not facilitate adaptation to different social contexts and further contribute to the invisibility of local knowledge and practices. The authors propose that a solution lies in adopting a pluriversal design approach, a concept developed by Escobar (2018) that seeks to integrate multiple forms of knowledge and production, thereby fostering the autonomy of communities through a connection between design and local practices.

Santos (2021) reinforces the need for enriched design perspectives that consider other contexts, advocating for the valorization of local repertoires. Likewise, Cruz (2021) presents technical tools for a decolonial approach to design. He outlines two methods: the first, a top-down approach, has two distinct interpretations. Hui (2016, as cited by Cruz, 2021) introduces the idea of "cosmotechnics," which argues that different cultures possess unique technologies that have been suppressed by Western influences. Conversely, Ansari (2018, as cited by Cruz, 2021) offers an alternative view of the top-down approach, positing that it represents a historical review of technology from the perspectives of marginalized cultures and peoples.

Another approach identified by Cruz (2021) is the bottom-up strategy, which involves engaging in co-design practices with oppressed communities

to ensure that their technical perspectives are preserved. This approach is characterized by active listening, mutual learning, and collective emotional commitment. Cruz (2021) also highlights existing practices aligned with these approaches, such as decolonial Artificial Intelligence (AI) that considers local knowledge and strives to prevent the perpetuation of colonial inequalities. For the development of inclusive AI, methodologies incorporating reverse pedagogy and community knowledge are suggested (Mohamed, Png & Isaac, 2020 as cited by Cruz, 2021).

It is evident that decolonial contemporary design is being actively shaped. The emergence of new books in the field, such as "Design for the Pluriverse" by Arturo Escobar, "The Black Experience in Design", "ExtraBold", "Decolonizing Design", among other works cited in the text, is an important indicator that authors are increasingly concerned with this subject and that new design perspectives are developing. In this way, decolonial contemporary design offers tools aimed at broadening the repertoire concerning cultures that have been erased, a fundamental effort to creating a more representative design practice. Thus, for the purposes of the analysis, critical points identified were: decolonial narratives and critical thinking.

5 Analysis

The infographic series "Some Babies Are Born Black" by illustrator and medical doctor Chidiebere Ibe seeks to depict the stages of pregnancy, conveying the message that not all babies are born white. Published on the author's Instagram account, the series presents the various stages of pregnancy using scientific illustrations along with textual information organized into distinct sections.

For the analysis, concepts defined in the bibliographical review were adopted as criteria to reflect about the infographics. These concepts address both the syntactic and the semantic dimensions of images and text in the context of studies on information design, as well as issues of Blackness, Black participation, and the consideration of a Black perspective in studies on Black representation (see Figure 1).

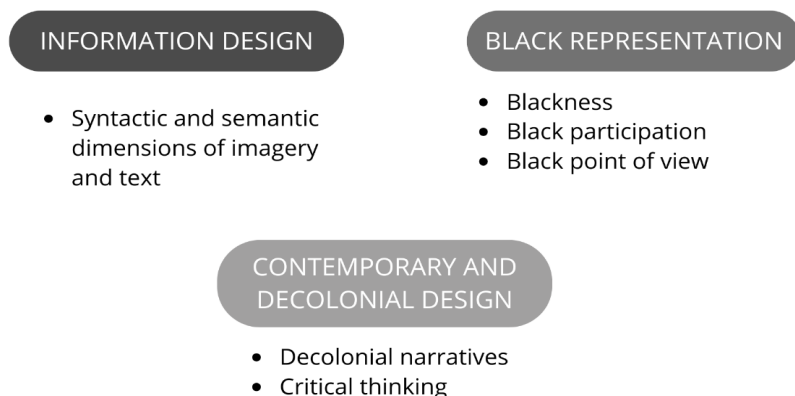


Figure 1 Concepts. Source: Authors.

What motivated choosing Ibe's (2023) series is its ability to clarify complex aspects of human anatomy, fitting within information design through infographics, and its presentation of images that offer a representative new perspective. This perspective not only enriches the fields of information design and scientific illustration but also aligns with the issues inherent in contemporary and decolonial design, as illustrated in Figure 2.

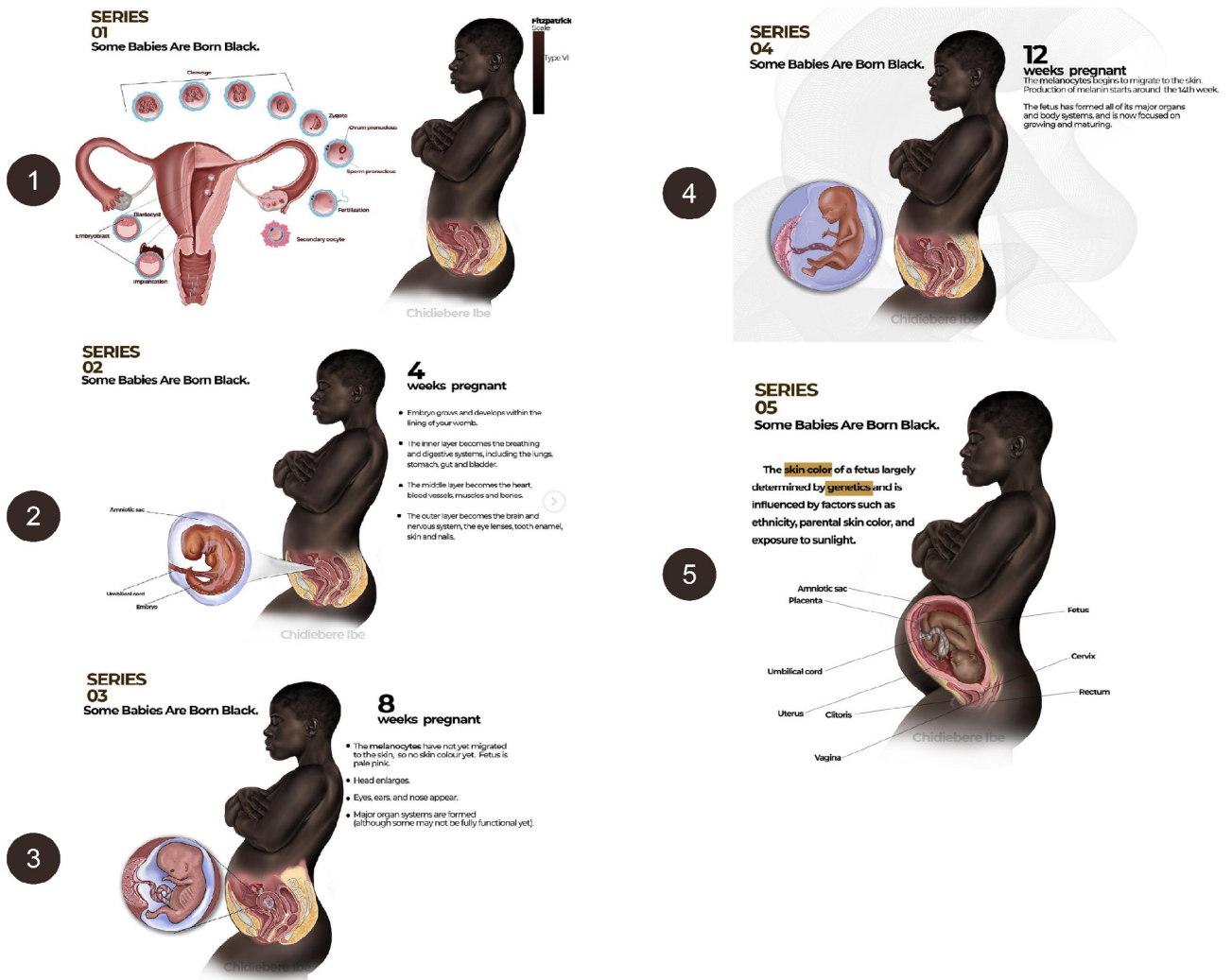


Figure 2 *Some babies are born black* Series. Source: Ibe (2023).

Beginning with the syntactic dimension of images and texts, the series employs visual settings that prioritize the objectivity of information. For example, the contrast between colors enhances the visualization of elements, while the clarity of lines and the use of straightforward, unadorned typography contribute to overall legibility. The images and texts are organized so that elements are positioned without overlaps or interference, with ample negative space used as resting gaps to guide the viewer's eye through the entire layout and focus on the conveyed information.

Even though Figure 3 highlights one phase, its purpose is to exemplify characteristics present throughout the series.

This journey of the viewer's eye is directed by the arrangement and visual contrast of the elements of visual language but is also influenced by visual hierarchy, particularly in the placement of texts. The texts are divided into sections with specific visual configurations for each, establishing a reading order and suggesting the type of content presented in each section. For instance, the series' title appears in the upper left corner accompanied by numbering that suggests a sequence. Information regarding changes throughout the weeks of pregnancy is found in the upper right corner; further down, specific details about each phase of gestation are offered as bullet points (see Figure 4).

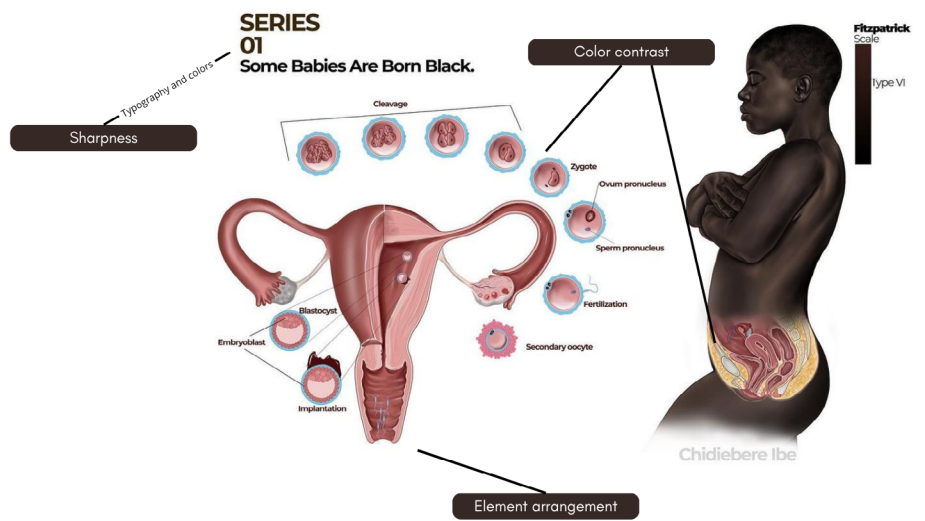


Figure 3 *Some babies are born black* Series. Source: Ibe (2023, April 3).

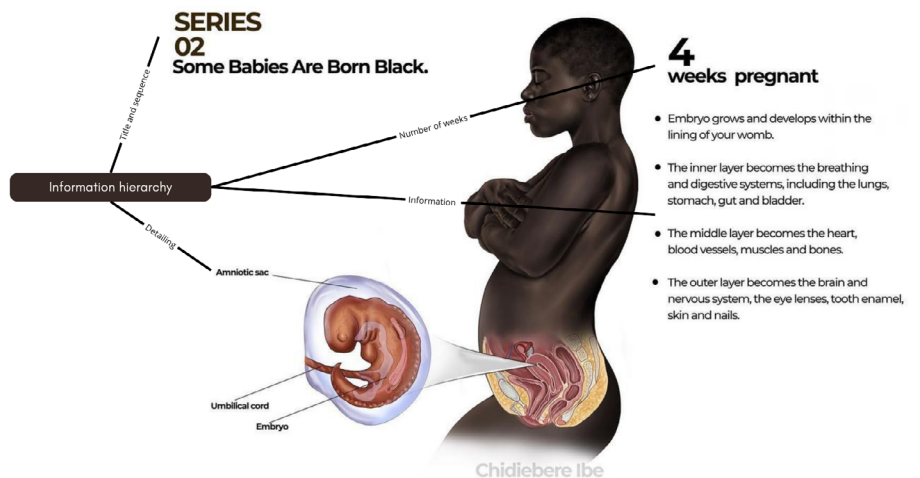


Figure 4 *Some babies are born black* Series. Source: Ibe (2023, April 10).

Additionally, the anatomical structures are labeled using subtle guiding lines. In the realistic and illustrative depictions of human beings and their anatomical structures, several visual resources are employed to effectively present the information. These include cross-sectional views of the human body, enlarged representations of the reproductive system, and zoom or close-up illustrations of key anatomical structures as part of the infographic (see Figure 5).

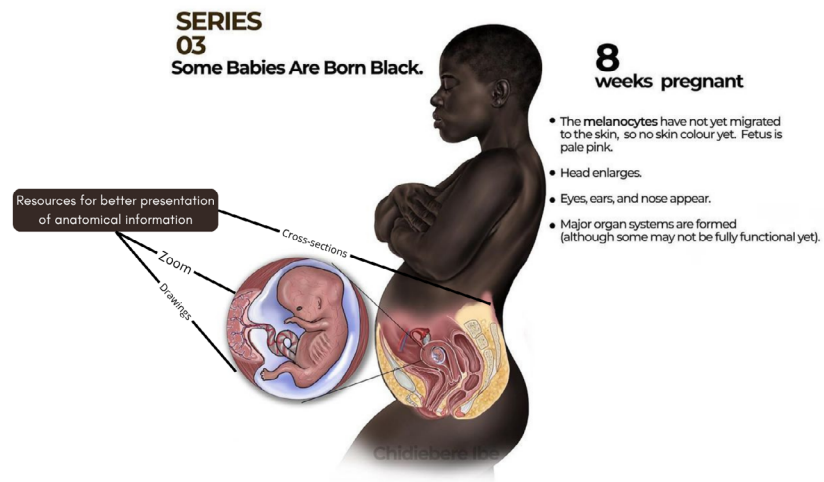


Figure 5 *Some babies are born black* Series. Source: Ibe (2023, April 28).

Regarding the semantic dimension of images and texts, a close relationship can be identified between the chosen representations, their functions, and the communicative objectives of the infographics. According to Horn's (1998) categories, the importance of "who" is represented in this series becomes evident. In this case, a Black pregnant woman and a Black baby. The illustrator also uses the semantic function of "what is inside" to reveal what occurs in the body during pregnancy and throughout the stages of the baby's development. The infographics incorporate a time indicator to demonstrate "when," as per Horn's (1998) categorization, thus linking the stages of fetal development to specific pregnancy weeks. Another significant function is the category "which," conveyed through explanatory texts about various aspects of fetal growth, with a focus on the development of melanin.

This amalgamation of syntactic and semantic functions influences the interpretation of concepts related to Black representation (see Figure 1), one of the central objectives of the series according to Ibe (2023). It constitutes an initiative by the illustrator in response to the scarcity of non-white representations in scientific illustrations, particularly within the medical field.

These representations are achieved through specific elements of information design. It is through deliberate configuration of images and texts that the infographics reveal insights that might not be immediately observable without the support of these representations. The portrayal of the body of the Black pregnant woman, the Black baby, and the information

regarding its development (especially relating to melanin) serve as powerful elements in the contexts of scientific illustration and infographics. They open possibilities for reflecting on the complexity of Black lives, as hooks (2019) notes, particularly given the extensive efforts to erase and render Black identities invisible in the maintenance of the colonial project and the coloniality of power.

Another important aspect of Ibe's (2023) series is that it offers a fresh perspective on an ordinarily mundane subject such as human reproduction, a process that occurs regardless of race. This shift in perspective brings a critique of the everyday representations we take for granted. For designers immersed in the creative process, it is vital to adopt a critical approach toward what is produced. This new narrative, proposed by Ibe (2023), ties in with contemporary design's objective of examining the world from a decolonial perspective.

6 Conclusion

Based on the analysis and the bibliographic framework, it is evident that new narratives regarding representation are necessary. Critically applied, such narratives will directly contribute to repopulating the visual repertoire in contemporary society, especially within the realms of teaching and learning, as many of the representations found in textbooks and educational materials still adhere to a colonial and white supremacist logic. Thus, representations of Black and non-white individuals, particularly within the context of information design, are crucial for the development of a conscious, critical, and anti-racist education.

It is therefore essential that both Black and non-Black designers collaborate in constructing critical narratives, ensuring that matters of representation are integrated into the development of research and design projects, an indispensable element in the plural and diverse society we inhabit.

The analysis demonstrates the importance of embracing alternative viewpoints on representation within design. Broadening our critical perspective has the power to expand our collective knowledge.

Ultimately, the analysis has identified the factors that make this series of infographics a positive and representative example for the Black community in the field of information design, from the basic principles of clarity and objectivity in presenting information, to the nuanced portrayal of Blackness in its representations. The primary goal of the article is to open discussions on this topic, encouraging further analyses in which positive cases serve as inspiration for new design approaches.

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