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Social Design as Violence

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Social Design as Violence

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Report

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Dedication

To Heath, for joining me in Austin.

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Social Design as Violence

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Faculty in art schools, colleges, and universities have increasingly begun institutionalizing and professionalizing "design for good" in their curricula. Students are currently being taught that social design is *good*—or at least preferable to working for large corporations—but are not being urged to question this feel-good assertion. When the trendy phrase "design for good" is used, for whom is it good? Though social design can result in powerful, laudable work, it often escapes critical scrutiny—particularly in educational settings—for two reasons: 1) by default, many consider non-commercial (broadly defined) work de facto virtuous and thus assume that any and all partnerships with non-profit organizations, for example, must be ethically commendable; and 2) many consider good intentions sufficient and do not inquire about actual effects and consequences.

My thesis work proposes that social design is just as ethically fraught as other kinds of design, if not more so, as any unintended harmful consequences of projects lie unnoticed and unchallenged under the guise of "doing good." Social designers' analyses of sociopolitical dynamics and histories of conflict are often thin. In some instances, their

projects may actually enact violence, maintaining imbalances of power and perpetuating the oppression of the very individuals and communities they try to serve. I argue that insights regarding power, state control, and privileges afforded by race, class, and gender should form a critical foundation for designers seeking to work in this field. If designers and design educators are serious about design providing a "social good," it is essential that they broaden their scope of analysis and critique to include the insights and strategies that activists and academics in other fields can offer.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Social design is a relatively new phenomenon that uses design thinking to enact social change. Despite noble intentions, designers and educators in this growing field commonly overlook the importance of their own and others' race, class, and gender privilege in the fields of design education and practice. I am interested in contributing to design discourse and pedagogy by critiquing the ways socially engaged design is popularly represented and performed within a complex political environment. This "complex political environment" is one comprised of a quieter, coercive violence that is characterized not by Jim Crow signs loudly announcing racist laws, or blatantly outlawing a woman's right to vote, but rather by a new normalized form of what political scientist and activist Joy James calls "state violence and coercion" that remains "invisible to most Americans." She argues this violence is "authorized or sanctioned by the U.S. government—its agencies and the constituents of state hegemony such as the mainstream media[…]."[1] It is an environment in which detractors say the U.S. is post-racial because we have a Black president, while unchecked police brutality runs rampant; in which mass incarceration is accepted as a means to ensure "public safety"; and in which many non-profit organizations (NPOs) are less focused on empowering communities or catalyzing social change than in maintaining the current social order, which favors their "progressive," white, wealthy elite funders.

It is helpful to think about this complex political environment in terms of a web of power relations that feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith elegantly characterizes as *relations of ruling*, which include the simultaneous pervasive structures of "power,

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[1] Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis:

organization, direction, and regulation."[2] Conceiving of power in this way moves away from a binary approach (ruler v. ruled) and better reflects the intricacies of how we simultaneously dominate and are dominated.

Designers and design educators are implicated in acts of violence. By and large, the conventional design process sacrifices complexity and nuance for clarity in its messaging—it is about tidying up rather than rendering difficult. It starts with a problem and ends with a solution. This residue of orderliness still exists despite the discipline's expansion along with the new roles designers are seeking to fill (i.e. designer as policy-maker, systems designer, community organizer, etc.). Design requires more space for questioning, more critical thinking that enables this recognition of messy power relationships (if not to *name* them, to know they *exist*). M. Jacqui Alexander provides a reminder that is helpful in this context: "there are no innocent spaces; thus, all spaces are fraught with interests, both conflicting and contradictory."[3] Designers are presumptuous if/when they assume everything is solvable through design or believe their endeavors to be purely "good." Because designers and educators have begun to enact and promote this position, a step backward may be necessary.

In studying design practice and methods, it is beneficial to (re)consider what we understand as *violence* and to expand our notions of what can be harmful in order to look at the effects of the seemingly benevolent or mundane. I am particularly interested in examining the violence of erasure, concealment, and reduction within social design. In the chapter *Social Design as Alibi*, I use three examples to locate spaces and instances of design's complicity in violent acts or processes. In *Broadening/Unsolving*, I propose an

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[2] Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 3.

[3] M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 108.

alternative educational framework and creative practice that expands on the typical social

design education.

Chapter 2: Social Design as Alibi

There are many names for this developing field: social design, social impact design, design for change, design for good, socially responsible design, design for the other 90%, and so on. Whereas design has historically been tied to material production—websites, publications, objects—this newer genre advocates for a broader definition of what design can be, with designers utilizing their skills to enact social change. What constitutes *social change*—is it business innovation? political activism?—is up for debate.

Shana Agid provides a brief introduction to social design in her essay "Social Design and its Political Contexts," and offers an important critique:

> In discussions of social design, the "social" is rarely linked explicitly to political structures—the underlying structural forces and logics that shape and determine both systems and their repercussions for people and communities. An engagement or analysis of power is often also absent, and *qualities* of good or ideal social relationships are presumed to be shared by "society," as are, sometimes, understandings of what it might take to produce those conditions.[4]

There has been no overnight declaration of social design's entry into mainstream design discourse, though the *First Things First* manifesto—printed in *The Guardian* in its entirety in 1964—is an oft-referenced document by designers interested in using their skills for social change.[5] Ken Garland wrote and 21 other designers (all white and only two of whom were women) signed this short declaration. The manifesto called for design to be more "meaningful" in a British society in which design was largely linked to selling goods. In both 2000 and 2010, groups of designers revamped the previous manifesto, stoking designers' enthusiasm for design and social impact:

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[4] Shana Agid, "How do we design something to transition people from a system that doesn't want to let them go? Social Design and its Political Contexts," *Design Philosophy Papers* 3 (December 2011), accessed June 11, 2014, http://desphilosophy.com/dpp/dpp_journal/journal.html.
[5] Ken Garland, "First Things First Manifesto" (London: Privately published, 1964).

Unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises demand our attention. Many cultural interventions, social marketing campaigns, books, magazines, exhibitions, educational tools, television programmes, films, charitable causes and other information design projects urgently require our expertise and help.[6]

In this version from 2000 we can see the seeds, the promises of a vague *social design* practice, in which designers present a list of cultural forms that are purported to be more noble than consumer culture. The '64 text described consumerism as sheer noise, thus rendering everything else as silent; the 2000 manifesto appears to respond by asserting that indistinct "charitable causes" are what can quiet the buzzing. The authors in all versions lambast the notion of using design in support of selling a parade of commercial items, from cat food and striped toothpaste to fizzy water and cigarettes. They lament capitulating to the commodity and designing consumable objects. In characterizing pro bono and educational work as somehow distinct from or different in nature from the commodity economy, these designers reveal their naiveté about how the non-profit industrial complex and the educational system are implicated in state-sanctioned violence and global capitalist hegemony.[7] The designers' unexamined assumptions point to the central problem with the field of social design: many of the well-meaning people who want their work and lives to *mean something* (to design something *good*) lack the critical tools to interrogate *meaning* (what does *good* mean in our cultural, political, and social world?).

Agid contextualizes her framework of social design with the 1972 publication by Victor Papanek entitled *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, where Papanek "saw design for the market and design for 'social need' as necessarily in

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[6] Kalle Lasn et al., "First Things First Manifesto 2000," *Eye Magazine* 33 (9), accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/first-things-first-manifesto-2000.

[7] INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, ed. *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-profit Industrial Complex* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007).

opposition."[8] Agid bridges this with the essay written 30 years later by Sylvia and Victor Margolin entitled "A 'Social Model' of Design: Issues of Practice and Research," describing their aims of social design as "design for people with less economic power whose needs neither define nor drive markets, e.g., '…people with low incomes or special needs due to age, health, or disability' and 'people in underserved populations.'" Agid adds her own addendum to this: "Presumably these are also people who have less access to political power."[9]

Contemporary professional organizations now support these endeavors from Papanek and the Margolins, creating such infrastructures as the *Design for Good* branch of AIGA (formerly the American Institute of Graphic Arts and now simply known as "the professional association for design").[10] This particular section of AIGA's website reads:

> ***A movement to ignite, accelerate and amplify design-driven social change***
>
> Design for Good is a platform to build and sustain the implementation of design thinking for social change. This platform creates opportunities for designers to build their practice, their network, and their visibility. Design for Good recognizes the wide range of designers' work and leadership in social change which benefits the world, our country and our communities.[11]

In summary, we can arrive at the following depiction of social design: it is rooted in its supposed opposition to the market; it is for the underserved populations; and it benefits our world, country, and communities. Both grandiose and imprecise, this phrasing is persistent in contemporary social design rhetoric. Predictably, there is quite a

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[8] Agid, "Social Design and its Political Contexts."
[9] Agid, "Social Design and its Political Contexts."
[10] For more information on how Papanek was originally "disliked, even loathed by his contemporaries" after publishing *Design and the Real World*, see Alice Rawsthorn, "An Early Champion of Good Sense," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/16/arts/16iht-design16.html.
[11] "Design for Good," AIGA, accessed December 10, 2014, www.aiga.org/design-for-good.

large range—both in politics as well as form—of commitments and ideas of what work looks like that is "beneficial to society."

For example, many design studios simply dedicate a certain amount of time to non-profit clients. A couple examples are Verynice (in New York and Los Angeles) where 50% of the work they do is pro bono for NPOs such as a breast cancer prevention organization for which they created a mobile application promoting self-examinations, or their work on an anti-fracking campaign with the National Resource Defense Council.[12] Firebelly in Chicago is another studio that represents themselves as: "Good Design for Good Reason.™ *We create positive world change connecting authentic companies with real people in socially responsible ways*."[13] Additional taglines or mission statements for like-minded studios include: "Strategic design for good causes;"[14] "We explore, prototype, realize & educate to close the gap in equality;"[15] "We design tools for positive behavior change;"[16] and "Builds bridges between clients and communities to enable positive social change."[17]

A CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL DESIGN

When the ubiquitous phrase "Design for good" is used, for whom is it good? Though social design can indeed result in powerful, laudable work, it often escapes critical scrutiny—particularly in educational settings—for two reasons: 1) by default,

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[12] "Welcome to verynice.co," Verynice, accessed December 3, 2014, http://verynice.co.
[13] "Firebelly Design – Chicago Graphic Design," Firebelly Design, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.firebellydesign.com/work.
[14] "Elefint Designs | Strategic Design for Good Causes," Elefint Designs, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.elefintdesigns.com.
[15] "Catapult Design," accessed December 1, 2014, https://catapultdesign.org.
[16] "Theory of Change," Greater Good Studio, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.greatergoodstudio.com.
[17] "Worldstudio," accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.worldstudioinc.com.

many consider non-commercial work de facto virtuous and thus assume that partnerships with NPOs, for example, must be ethically commendable; and 2) many consider good intentions sufficient and do not inquire about actual effects/consequences. This field is just as ethically fraught as other kinds of design, if not more so, as any unintended harmful consequences of projects lie unnoticed and unchallenged under the guise of "doing good" (*Figure 1*). In some instances, these projects maintain imbalances of power and perpetuate the oppression of the very individuals and communities they try to serve.
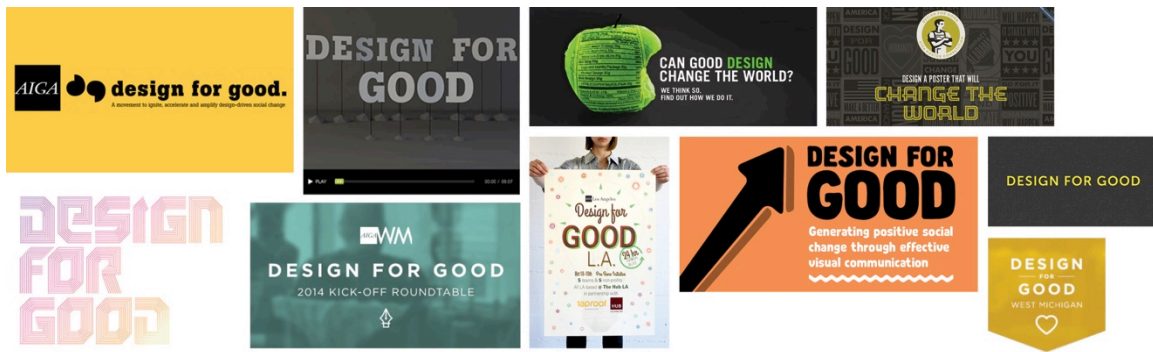
Figure 1:   *Design for Good*, various screenshots from the web. Image collage by author, 2014.

In 2014 I began to visually chart the territory of social design—both to help my own understanding, as well as demonstrate an incoherence of this field (*Figure 2*). I first gathered projects that might be discussed in a social design classroom and then created five overarching categories: *Institutional Distrust*; *Design Studios*; *Design Thinking + Business = Innovation*; *Institutional Trust & Collaboration*; and *Intensive Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration*. My intention was to construct a fairly unbiased map, one that creates a lay of the land. I chose the format of a map because it enables viewers to more easily visualize connections and identify critiques that might not be apparent when projects are viewed in isolation.
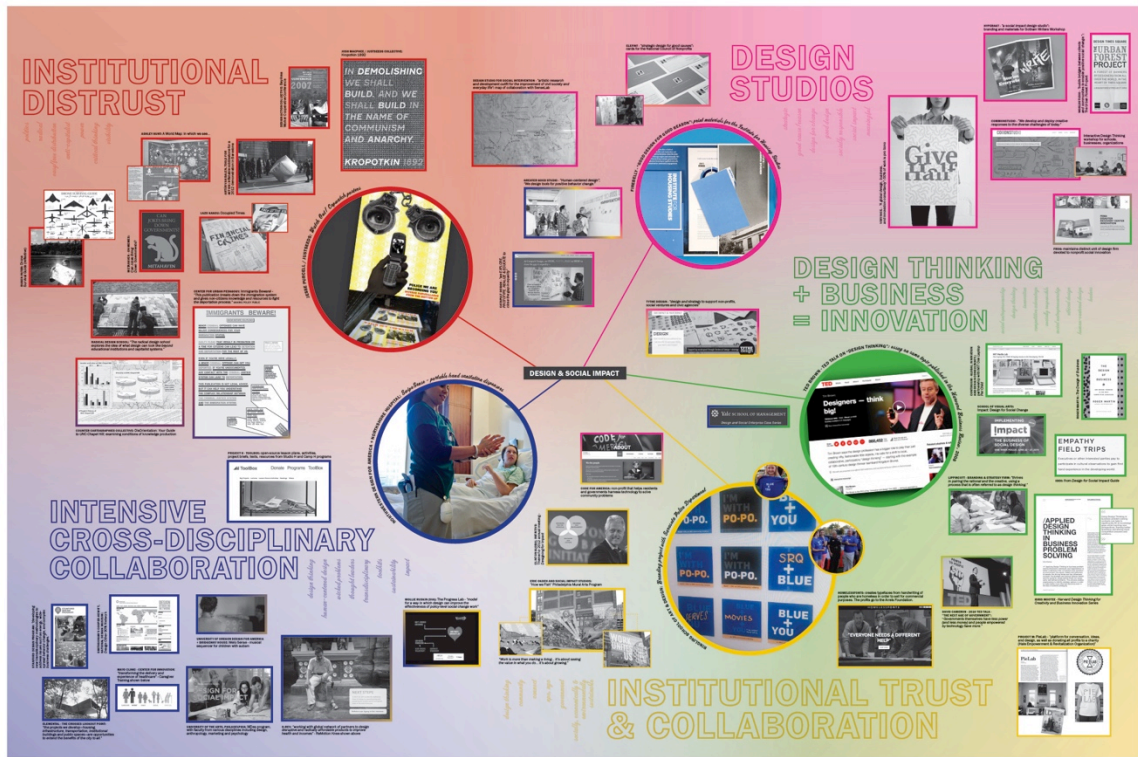
Figure 2:   *Design and Social Impact*, digital print, 36" x 24", 2014. Image by author, © 2015.

Unsurprisingly, once I started organizing the projects within these categories, I found there were not clear-cut divisions. I chose to reflect some of those blurred lines via color gradients, overflowing one area into the next. While the map is not intended to be a final conclusion or comprehensive summary of the field, seeing these select pairings enables me to more easily see the stark differences that exist underneath one umbrella. In a classroom, faculty might blur together a handbook that provides accessible resources for fighting the deportation process[18] with a design studio committing a chunk of their

18 "Immigrants Beware!" Center for Urban Pedagogy, accessed April 20, 2015, http://welcometocup.org/Projects/MakingPolicyPublic/ImmigrantsBeware.

time to non-profit work in general[19] with progressive CEOs eager to integrate design thinking into their process.[20]

There is a large swath of work here, and this ambiguity—in both rhetoric and the work produced/taught—is part of the problem. For those who take social activism seriously, my hope is not to be more *narrow* in terms of the work we do as designers, but to be more aware and articulate of the differences within the field. The phrase "social design" and its many variations are used interchangeably, without much care, in order to cover a lot of territories. This haziness makes it easier to push anything that's essentially not corporate work into the "good" bucket, missing the subtlety of other kinds of violence or exploitation.

I use three specific examples—from an independent organization, a design classroom, and a creative agency—that help to demonstrate where good intentions become problematic projects. These include: *PieLab* from the program Project M, *Blue + You* from a student class at Ringling College of Art and Design, and *10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman* from the anti-street harassment group Hollaback! in collaboration with Rob Bliss Creative. All three of these projects capitalize on liberal progressive ideas that create access to a kind of social design capital in the form of portfolio pieces and industry accolades, while keeping an investment in a grassroots activist practice at arm's length.

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[19] "Welcome to verynice.co."

[20] Tim Brown and Roger Martin, "Capitalism Needs Design Thinking," *IDEO*, accessed April 24, 2015, http://www.ideo.com/by-ideo/capitalism-needs-design-thinking.

Project M: PieLab

In 2003 John Bielenberg developed Project M, a collaborative program for creative people interested in contributing to "the greater good." They do workshops and what they call *blitzes*, where they form a team of creative folks to complete a project within a short time frame—between 48 hours and seven days.[21] They are also known for their two-week intensive sessions where participants (typically design students) pay a tuition fee to gather in a single location to embark on a "social-impact project" under the mentorship of advisors. With only two weeks to adjust to both a new place as well as new collaborators, it is without a doubt a challenge to produce anything within that timeframe, let alone make connections with residents that allow for a meaningful understanding of the community. On December 2, 2012, at the Salt Lake City branch of AIGA, Bielenberg delivered a lecture on the development of Project M. He rooted his talk, "Thinking Wrong, Doing Right," in the notion that graphic designers are victims of heuristic biases. He encourages "thinking wrong" as a way to break from standard creative processes, and by default, break from typical solutions.

Project M is based in Belfast, Maine, but they've used Greensboro, Alabama, to test out a number of their ideas. According to Census data from 2000, about 60% of Greensboro residents identify as Black or African American, with about 35% of the population living below the poverty line; 47% of those are under the age of 18 and 26% are age 65 or over.[22] In 2002, *The Birmingham News* referred to this town as "Alabama's

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[21] "Blitzes & Workshops – Project M," Project M Lab, accessed April 15, 2015, http://www.projectmlab.com/Blitzes-Workshops.

[22] "United States Census Bureau," U.S. Department of Commerce, accessed April 29, 2014, https://www.census.gov.

Third World."[23] Project M efforts in Greensboro include HERObike (handcrafted bicycles made from local bamboo) and PieLab.[24]

Figure 3:   Project M – PieLab.
3a: Photo of PieLab façade. "PieLab - Project M - Thinking Wrong since 2003," Project M Lab, accessed April 15, 2014, www.projectmlab.com/PieLab.
3b: Photo of PieLab interior. "PieLab - Project M - Thinking Wrong since 2003," Project M Lab, accessed April 15, 2014, www.projectmlab.com/PieLab.
3c: Photo of PieLab designers. "PieLab by John Bielenberg," Kickstarter, last modified January 30, 2009, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/795396878/pielab.

The Project M'ers (as they call themselves) portray PieLab as "a combination pop-up cafe, design studio and civic clubhouse" (*Figure 3*). Using pie as the foundation to bring people together, one of the designers, Brian Jones described PieLab as providing "a neutral environment in a traditionally segregated town where people from every race and class are welcome to sit together and talk candidly about whatever is on their

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[23] John T. Edge, "Pie + Design = Change," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 8, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/magazine/10pielab-t.html?pagewanted=1&_r=3&.

[24] "HERObike," accessed April 15, 2015, http://www.herobike.org.

mind."[25] From this ideally candid and open conversation, ideas are born. Once they pair ideas + design, it leads to positive change. Or even further simplified, as the masthead of their website states: "Pie + Conversation = Social Change." Any profits go to the Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization (HERO), a local 501c3 non-profit, dedicated to ending rural poverty particularly through housing education and construction.[26] The concept behind PieLab started as a space for open conversation, but it expanded to include community initiatives, such as their relationship with YouthBuild, an organization that provides job training to low-income young people. Through this job-training program, local students learn hospitality, marketing, and cooking skills, in order to create a profitable business. With a local resource—pecans—students learned to make butter and brittle, and they called this business *Pecans!* Once Project M'ers faded away and HERO took more control of PieLab, this relationship with YouthBuild, fortunately, appeared to become a more important part of the space than the idea of it being a "civic clubhouse." Whether it was due to the designers losing interest, or a strategic move to pass PieLab off to HERO, it seems a responsible move to leave it in the hands of a local organization.

Project M and PieLab have garnered media attention from such outlets as *The New York Times Magazine*,[27] *Bon Appetit*,[28] *Fast Company*,[29] and *Design Observer*;[30]

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[25] Alissa Walker, "PieLab in Rural Alabama Serves Up Community, Understanding, and, Yes, Pie," *Fast Company*, June 19, 2009, http://www.fastcompany.com/1297320/pielab-rural-alabama-serves-community-understanding-and-yes-pie.

[26] "PieLab," accessed April 15, 2014, http://pielab.org.

[27] Edge, "Pie + Design = Change."

[28] Julia Bainbridge, "Deep-Dish Apple Pie Recipe from Pielab," *Bon Appetit*, October 14, 2010, http://www.bonappetit.com/test-kitchen/ingredients/article/deep-dish-apple-pie-recipe-from-pielab.

[29] Walker, "PieLab in Rural Alabama."

[30] William Drenttel, "Report from Hale County, Alabama," *Design Observer*, July 5, 2009, http://designobserver.com/feature/report-from-hale-county-alabama/8877.

they secured a James Beard Foundation nomination for best restaurant design;[31] and Pecans! won a $12,000 Design Ignites Change Implementation Award in 2009.[32] Besides the substantial award for Pecans!, less has been written or acknowledged about the success of the program on its own terms: to empower the residents. The decision to teach and share skills with young people is a respectable one, but the initial hope to spark creative unity by ignoring race and class in an impoverished town is not exactly righteous. Even with noble intentions, the privileged position of a designer dropping in to a community to make improvements is still one that arises from a tacit assumption of superiority; one could even call it a colonialist attitude. As performance studies scholar Diana Taylor observed, "Colonialism strips the original, as denoting cultural belonging and autochthonous expression, from the colonized and transfers it to the colonizer as a marker of cultural taste, privilege and symbolic capital."[33]

This simplistic commitment to *design for good* helps lead to the designer-as-savior model that de-centers and disempowers the community it aims to assist. This creates a challenge in the design field, where award competitions routinely recognize sleek, polished results that focus on surface and aesthetics with a nod to social justice. Projects that *do* keep affected communities—in all of their complexity—at the center of the process are often motivated by creating slow, incremental systematic change: these don't have the grand punch of presenting a solution, however, and typically aren't as sexy in appearance.

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[31] Alissa Walker, "James Beard Foundation Lauds Restaurant Designers For Their Good Taste," *Fast Company*, March 22, 2010, http://www.fastcompany.com/1593665/james-beard-foundation-lauds-restaurant-designers-their-good-taste.

[32] "News," Design Ignites Change, last modified February 22, 2010, http://www.designigniteschange.org/news/86-_design-ignites-change_-brings-the-best-ideas-to-life-through-its-inaugural-implementation-awards-program.

[33] Diana Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 221.

Writer Rob Walker revisited Hale County, where Greensboro is situated, to speak to residents about Project M's efforts. With some similar concerns to the above, he asks: "It's safe to say that Hale County has done a lot for design. But what has design done for Hale County?" From his interviews he gathered that there was a bit more ambivalence present amongst residents than is portrayed via the designers:

> If you think about it, though, why should we find that surprising? Perhaps it's because the discourse around social design has become overly idealistic. We see wonderful-looking projects in the press, described as creators of high-impact social change. It's inspirational.[34]

Barbara Muse and her nephew André, long-time residents of Greensboro, scoffed at the $4 slice of pie from PieLab, and when Walker inquired about a different Project M venture—the one that involves custom bamboo bicycles priced $300 to $2,100—that was clearly ludicrous: "A bamboo bike? People around here don't ride bikes."[35]

From photos on the website, the Project M team for PieLab appears to be a group of all white participants; these participants identify their interest in creating a "neutral" space. What does this mean? A space that is objective? To unify black and white community members? A space detached from politics? Jacqui Alexander reminds us that innocent spaces are an impossibility.[36] When white liberal designers use this impoverished community as a trial breeding ground to try out their chops at change-making, they may be enacting more harm than good. The designer-as-savior lands in a community for a short amount of time, contributes to a charitable cause, all while advancing the future of design into new territories—and gets serious accolades for it. It is in this existence that social design exists as an alibi, working under the guise of social

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[34] Rob Walker, "The Heart of Hale County," *Fast Company*, January 13, 2014, http://www.fastcompany.com/3024175/the-heart-of-hale-county#4.
[35] Walker, "The Heart of Hale County."
[36] Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 108.

change while the discourse avoids root causes and structural problems. Designers have skills that other disciplines may find useful and applicable, but it's both audacious and reductive to map the usual commercial design language onto community projects like this: define the *challenge* or *problem* and then devise a *solution*. Efforts similar to PieLab tend to gloss over the structural systems that have caused these "challenges" (segregation and poverty, for example) in the first place. Social design as a practice becomes yet another commodity that, in this instance, reinscribes the racialized stratification present in Greensboro by garnering social and real capital (by way of professional recognition) for the (white) designers. More dangerous still are social design's implications as an alibi: while designers and educators label this growing field as politically useful and promoting change for *good*, they are granting social designers immunity from the possibility of doing harm while simultaneously supporting capitalist social relations via the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC). I will return to the NPIC later in the *Professionalization and Academia* section.

Blue + You

In Spring 2014, Bernard Canniffe taught a collaborative design course at the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. Some of the most well-known design magazines in the industry recognize Canniffe's professional work and he also has an extensive teaching history in higher education. He was recently named as the chair of the Graphic Design department at Iowa State University after serving as the head of Graphic Design, Advertising Design and the Business of Art and Design at Ringling; he was formerly the chair at Minneapolis College of Art and Design; and before that, he was

the co-chair at Maryland Institute College of Art.[37] He also currently serves as an advisor with the group Project M. I intentionally situate Canniffe, his work, and his affiliations in this way to demonstrate two key things: first, that he is professionally successful, and second, that this project at Ringling is not outside of the political logic of his practice or pedagogical approach.

Canniffe rooted this design course in creating a single collaborative project for the duration of the semester: students were asked to "rebrand the police's involvement with the community," to reinforce "community policing," reminding residents that the "police are with you and not against you."[38] I was unable to obtain the syllabus for this class, though I did find a student's process book freely shared online.[39] As I looked through the book, which documented the group's research, correspondence, and creative iterations, I saw no mention of engaging with any notion of contention—either through dialogue with police, community members, or through the individual's own personal research. The students' final concept of *Blue + You* manifested in a new, easy-to-navigate website and the initiation of community events with the intention of placing the community and police in Sarasota on the same team (*Figure 4*).

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[37] "Canniffe Named Chair Of ISU Graphic Design Department," Iowa State University – College of Design, last modified June 9, 2014, http://www.design.iastate.edu/news/6/9/2014/canniffe.

[38] "Sarasota Police News Conference: Launch of Blue +You," *YouTube* video, 10:45, accessed April 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1528b0Ixh9E&list=UUA-v3ISGs0kF51HHHRIcUtg.

[39] Anna Jones, "COLLAB: Sarasota Police Department: Re-Branding the Community Outreach," issuu, accessed June 5, 2014, http://issuu.com/annamarychristinejones/docs/spd_processbook. Design students are often asked to create process books in order to provide project background, communicate their research, project communication with clients, creative iterations, among other aspects.
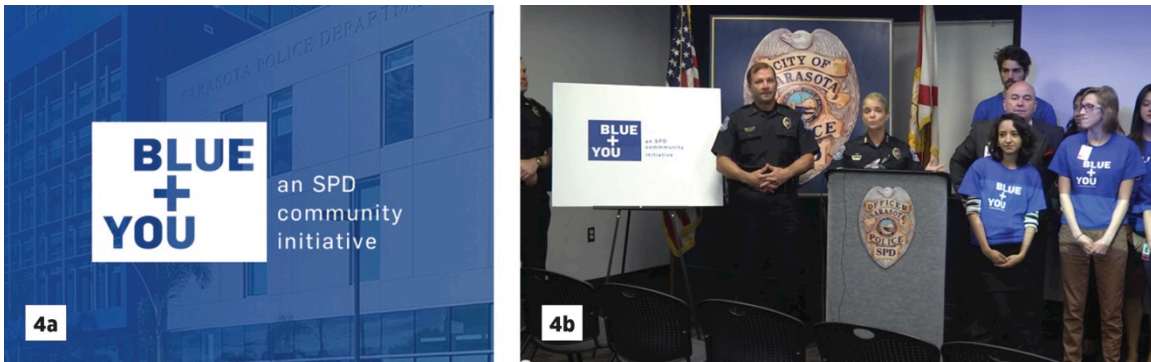
Figure 4: Blue + You.
4a: Screenshot of campaign logo. "Blue + You," Sarasota Police Department, accessed June 5, 2014, www.sarasotapd.org/blue-you.
4b: Screenshot of "Sarasota Police News Conference: Launch of Blue + You," *YouTube* video, 10:45, posted by "SarasotaPoliceDept,"April 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1528b0Ixh9E&list=UUA-v3ISGs0kF51HHHRIcUtg.

There is no apparent explanation or discovery into *why* that gap exists and why the "us against them" mentality exists; just that it inexplicably does, and thus, can be mended (or at least improved) by community movie nights and better web accessibility.[40] At best, it is irresponsible design and teaching to embark on this territory and not acknowledge historical context of police brutality and the role of systemic racism that, despite being a major component of this subject, is wholly absent in the representation of this design process.

The student book led me to a Tumblr page the class kept for the duration of the course. Here I found more visual documentation of meetings and design iterations as well as a collection of shared links and quotes. Among these are: an article on how to make something go viral on the internet (tips from BuzzFeed); the results of a "radical" rebranding of the Milwaukee Police Department; the Russian police choir singing a rendition of Daft Punk's "Get Lucky" at the Sochi Olympics; and a commercial from

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[40] "Blue + You," Sarasota Police Department, accessed June 5, 2014, http://www.sarasotapd.org/blue-you.

Levi's *Go Forth to Work – Braddock, Pennsylvania* campaign that features romanticized images of a depressed post-industrial town as a backdrop to a voiceover featuring lines like: "maybe the world breaks on purpose so we can have work to do."[41] Another Tumblr post shows a series of photographs from what appears to be an onsite meeting at the police station, with this caption below:

> Students are thinking of the role of design differently because of the experience. Students ask questions that they would not ask in theoretical courses. They think about the role of design as an engager, as a listener, as a activator *[sic]*. They begin to see design with a role that is bigger. Not as delivery models. Not as a poster, not as a leaflet, but more as an agent of change[.][42]

The actions of designers do indeed have an impact. It is not enough that designers mean well, interacting with a community or working collaboratively with a team. *Blue + You*'s call for harmony blocks the possibility for a conversation that interrogates antagonisms in a historical and political context, one that incorporates an analysis of state-sanctioned violence and structural racism. The effect not only obscures histories of state violence, but also delegitimizes feelings of anger and distrust among critics of police as an institution. This is the same liberal (and largely white) narrative in the mainstream media during the highly publicized police murder of Michael Brown in August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, and echoes the state's subsequent failure to indict police officer Darren Wilson for Brown's murder. Brown's supposed criminality, not his blackness, allowed for an isolated narrative of "right and wrong" and a decentering of structural racism in police enforcement. When cultural producers create an image, it enacts a regime of politics, such as the liberal call for unity embedded in *Blue + You*. It actively works against the creation of a space for oppressed communities to act out justified

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[41] "Rebranding Sarasota Police," Tumblr, last modified April 14, 2015, http://collabspd.tumblr.com.

[42] "Rebranding Sarasota Police," Tumblr, last modified March 14, 2015, http://collabspd.tumblr.com/page/3.

anger; it forecloses these possibilities of confronting intersecting social forces by rendering complex historical problems into a tidy white-washed narrative about a simple misunderstanding between the police and community members.

10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman

Hollaback! is an NPO whose mission is to end street harassment. In 2014 they partnered with Rob Bliss Creative to create a two-minute video demonstrating what it's like to spend a day walking in New York City as a woman.[43] The camera stays with a woman in her 20s, purportedly for ten hours, while she is "praised" by a series of men in the street. This harassment is mostly demonstrated in comments such as "Hey, what's up girl?", "God bless you mami," and "Damn girl!" (*Figure 5*). Rob Bliss Creative (who appears to be one man) promotes himself as "A Viral Video Marketing Agency" that excels at garnering views on YouTube.[44] Their website concludes "Our work can almost always be summed up as: fun, inclusive, hopeful."[45] In *10 Hours*, Hollaback! likely had the best of intentions when they initiated this collaboration, and it was indeed successful in some aspects. True to the Rob Bliss promise, it was an engaging video and did acquire a lot of views, initiating much media attention and discussion. However, much of this attention was in the form of warranted criticism: the video, with the exception of one instance, excluded all interactions with white men from their final cut, leaving only representations of Black and Latino men as the perpetrators of street harassment.

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[43] "10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman," *YouTube* video, 1:57, October 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A.

[44] "Rob Bliss Creative," accessed December 4, 2014, http://www.robblisscreative.com.

[45] "About," Rob Bliss Creative, accessed December 4, 2014, http://www.robblisscreative.com/about.

Figure 5:   Screenshot of "10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman," YouTube video, 1:57, posted by "Street Harassment Video," October 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A.

Again, there are consequences for the images one produces and puts out in the world, but what is excluded can have just as much impact. Joy James' concept of *symbolic rage* is helpful for understanding the potential severity of visual and rhetorical representation. She writes:

> Symbolic rage is connected to such performance in that the symbols associated with one's fury supersede and determine responses to specific abuses that have allegedly sparked that fury. Violent anger is supposedly inspired by the myths and symbols that precede and take precedence over any specific criminal act.[46]

This video is posted on Rob Bliss' YouTube channel and shows multiple comments that denounce the existence—or even possibility—of racism in the creation and editing of this video because it's simply the "truth." The editor's obfuscation of white harassment through the sole inclusion of men of color further perpetuates these false ideas that white men are more respectful (and less threatening) than Black or Latino men. This video is a prime case that demonstrates why designers who are interested in socially engaged work must also engage with the concept of intersectionality.[47] To utilize an intersectional approach insists that oppression is multilayered, and race, sex, gender, and class are intertwined. One system cannot be wholly dismantled without also addressing the others. The theory of intersectionality, though decades old and commonly employed in feminist analyses, is generally not in the purview of traditional design education.

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[46] James, *Resisting State Violence*, 133.

[47] Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1299.

Professionalizing Social Design

Shana Agid asks a pertinent question about the loose rhetoric around "good" and "change":

> How, instead, might increasing the capacity in design professions, among designers, and in specific design work to see into a range of possible futures, including ones shaped by political visions or desires to fundamentally change relationships of power, change the nature of "designing for change?"[48]

I am struck by Agid's article because it is one of the first times I had read a design writer explicitly speaking to the absence of dialogue around power relations in design education. Agid draws on the work of sociologist Avery Gordon: "Power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply."[49] Agid goes on to say:

> Gordon refers to the ways power is wielded, or just exists and evolves, between people, groups of people, and institutions. So, on the one hand, she argues, power is not something static. On the other hand, it can be used to create harmful conditions, with or without intention. Power manifests through exchanges—through the sometimes literal give and take of information, resources, access, opportunity, and even legibility.[50]

Power is pervasive and cannot be avoided; instead, designers and design educators should continually examine and interrogate power relations within design research and process in order to create a much more reflexive practice. Good intentions are not enough.

Julie Lasky's white paper summarizing the 2012 Social Impact Design Summit held at The Rockefeller Foundation New York offices is both a typical representation of

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[48] Agid, "Social Design and its Political Contexts."
[49] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 3.
[50] Agid, "Social Design and its Political Contexts."

and itself an instance of a demonstrable exercise of power. The Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum organized the one-day event along with the National Endowment for the Arts and The Lemelson Foundation. Thirty-four participants were invited, comprising representatives from NPOs, branches of for-profit organizations and corporations, academic programs, and governmental organizations.

In the white paper, Lasky explains the reasons for organizing the Summit, including addressing the ambiguity of naming; acknowledging gaps and challenges in the field; and identifying pathways in regards to education and/or career-tracks. In regards to the educational and professional infrastructures for social design, she writes:

> Social impact design—one term that refers to the practice of design for the public good, especially in disadvantaged communities—has attracted powerful interest in recent years. Increasingly, both practicing designers and students are seeking opportunities in this burgeoning discipline. But are the professional and academic structures in place to support them? And how might such structures be improved?[51]

Early in the day, one participant asked the group "How do we define socially responsible, and how does it get measured, and who gets to frame what we mean by socially responsible?" This did not receive any responses (worthy of Lasky's mention, anyway), and this is where the report becomes problematic. It is unclear how the organizers themselves define "socially responsible," how these participants were selected and why, and what the consequences and implications are for this particular group of people to outline where and what the "field" should be moving toward.[52] In a previous review of the white paper, I have argued that:

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[51] Julie Lasky, *Design and Social Impact: A Cross-Sectoral Agenda for Design Education, Research and Practice* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2013): 6, accessed June 14, 2014, http://www.cooperhewitt.org/publications/design-and-social-impact.
[52] Lasky, *Design and Social Impact*, 20.

[Some of the most valuable discussion points represented in the report are] the lack of racial (and, I would add, economic and political) diversity among professional designers; an awareness that the community/designer relationship should be collaborative with solutions stemming from the community; the importance of creating support structures that would aid designers and communities in achieving successful implementation; and the question of whether professionalizing socially responsible design and creating a "career path" for it is even desirable.[53]

I was enthused to see these points of view expressed throughout the report, but disappointed that Lasky did not highlight them in her conclusion. Instead, she identified such topics as fundraising, evaluation, and persuasion/conversion (i.e., how to best communicate design's value through storytelling) as the most crucial issues to address next in the field of social design.

Nowhere in the report was there mention of any dialogue surrounding a more radical approach to community organizing and design, one that might rely on grassroots efforts over linking to NPOs and institutional frameworks. *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, an indispensible compilation of writing from INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, articulates the troublesome aspects of being wholly reliant on NPOs. Framed around the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC), mirroring both the military and prison industrial complex, the texts offer a counter to the Summit report. Ethnic studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez defines the NPIC as "the industrialized incorporation of pro-state liberal and progressive campaigns and movements into a spectrum of government-proctored non-profit organizations."[54] The writers who comprise this book's collection differ on

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[53] Becky Nasadowski, "Design and Social Impact," review of *Design and Social Impact: A Cross-Sectoral Agenda for Design Education, Research and Practice*, by Julie Lasky, *Design and Culture* 7, no. 1 (February 2015): 135.

[54] Dylan Rodríguez, "The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), 21.

just *how much* damage the NPIC is causing, but they do agree that NPOs cannot be the *only* site of struggle within communities if the goal is meaningful change.

Social welfare and NPOs give the government the illusion of progress, training people for their role in the system as it exists, instead of changing the structure. The NPIC co-opts existing community leadership by separating allies from their community, giving them jobs in NPOs and NGOs, and holding them answerable instead to the government, wealthy donors, and the hierarchical corporate structure of the NPO. Community organizer Paula X. Rojas points out this professionalization of activism instead of every day activism often encourages actions that look good to the media, but are essentially vacant.[55] Similarly, organizer Adjoa Florência Jones de Almeida criticizes the notion that the need to make money is imperative to creating change, with NPOs "pimping our communities' poverty in proposals" and "selling 'results' in reports."[56] She reasons, "social change is only radical if it promotes struggle and growth at every level—for the society at large, in our intimate and everyday relationships, and internally within ourselves."[57]

Is the work that organizers (or designers) do within a system actually sustaining that system or fighting against it? When people are immersed within these particular structures, it is difficult to recognize the internalization of capitalism. Many of these authors push back against the popular NPO model in the U.S. that often encourages negotiation and collaboration with the state and agree with Almeida, arguing for the need

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[55] Paula X. Rojas, "Are the Cops in Our Heads and Hearts?," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), 205.

[56] Adjoa Florência Jones de Almeida, "Radical Social Change: Searching for a New Foundation," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), 187.

[57] Almeida, "Radical Social Change," 192.

to build on the power that people have established within their communities—*separate* from the state. Additionally, many of the writers articulate the historical shift from grassroots community organizing to the NPO structure and the casualties they've garnered along the way because of this shift. Designers, however, are not co-opted into this NPO structure; rather, they are readily joining it.

The participants at the Summit and the authors in INCITE!'s book are all interested in the consequences of professionalizing either social design or activism (respectively). *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, however, is more concerned about this move toward careerism as co-opting a community's efforts and tempering struggles for radical change versus the Summit's desire to institutionalize the appropriate pathways from formal education to comfortable careers.

Social Design in Education

While the idea of graphic designers using their skills to work for social change has been on the table since at least the 1960s (even earlier for architects and industrial designers), it is only in the past decade that the topic has become pervasive in formal design education. While scanning academic job postings, one can see many design departments are explicit in seeking those well versed in social design, as these topical courses are taught at several research institutions and art schools alike. Although I have not conducted a systematic study of U.S. social design curricula, the syllabuses I have gathered to date do suggest that there are both well-considered and problematic approaches to engaging with social design in institutional settings.

One example of the university embrace of social design is a course taught by Maria Rogal in the graphic design department at the University of Florida. In 2004 Rogal

started *Design for Development* as an organization and she currently teaches it as a class by the same name, describing it as "a collaborative initiative with entrepreneurs in rural communities in southern Mexico" with aims "to foster small business development."[58] The bibliography page of the organization/course website contains a short list of links to such resources as: global design firm IDEO's Tim Brown writing on design thinking for the business sector; a *Bloomberg Business* article about a former advertising professional starting a new venture—Eco Africa Craft—after she was inspired on "one of her many trips from New York to Zimbabwe;"[59] and business owner Paul Polak's YouTube video, "12 Steps out of Poverty."[60] On Polak's personal website, visitors can learn he was

> named one of the world's "Brave Thinkers" by *The Atlantic Monthly* [in 2009], along with Barack Obama and Steve Jobs, for being willing to "risk careers, reputations, and fortunes to advance ideas that upend an established order."[61]

The select resources above are troubling to varying degrees, and I find it piercing that Polak would enthusiastically connect himself to Steve Jobs, who—despite his contributions to impressive technological developments—is known to have practiced particularly exploitative working conditions for his employees both in the U.S. and overseas.[62]

Rogal believes in "focusing on field research, ethnographic methods, sustainability, and responsible cultural representations," and immerses herself and

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[58] "Participants," Design for Development, accessed May 1, 2015, http://www.design4development.org/participants.

[59] Paula Lehman, "Issue: Eco Africa: Going Beyond Business," *Bloomberg Business*, December 5, 2008, http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/stories/2008-12-05/issue-eco-africa-going-beyond-businessbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice.

[60] "Bibliography," Design for Development, accessed May 1, 2015, http://www.design4development.org/resources/bibliography.

[61] "About Paul," Paul Polak, accessed May 1, 2015, http://www.paulpolak.com/about-paul.

[62] Mike Elk, "Remembering Steve Jobs' Record on Workers' Rights," *In These Times*, August 25, 2011, http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/11863/remembering_steve_jobs_record_on_workers_rights.

students in Maya communities to learn more before they design.[63] For example, she wants her students to better understand the discrepancy between representations of this community within a tourist economy versus what is lived reality for the residents. I trust she aims to "develop an amplified worldview in order to work responsibly and effectively at local and global levels" and "empower all project participants," but do not think she is enacting what she proclaims.[64] The fieldwork spans just one intensive week (more reminiscent of volunteer tourism than ethnography), and her bibliography fails to support her stated desire to emphasize cultural sensitivity. Students need more than a semester to fully and responsibly address the complex issues raised by this kind of work.

Conversely, one can find a more productive approach to social design in an older course taught by Stacy Asher at the University of San Francisco. In *Design + Social Change* "students will learn to compare and contrast design projects and social change by reading and interpreting texts and participating in class lectures and discussions. They will learn how to use critical thinking as a key skill in interpreting their social world."[65] In her syllabus, Asher recognizes the lessons to be learned from social movements and activist histories—and even asks her students to engage in a research project about them. This approach, however, is rare; more often courses and textbooks about social design are primarily invested in discussing the latest ways to insert design into businesses and NPO structures. In contrast, Asher's messier, interdisciplinary, and research-based approach allows for an acknowledgement of contentious political issues and study of such rich

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[63] Maria Rogal, "Design for Development" (paper presented at MX Design Conference: Impacto Social del Diseño, Mexico City, Mexico, October 28-29, 2009).

[64] Rogal, "Design for Development."

[65] "Special Topics in Design \\ University of San Francisco Art + Architecture \ Spring 2012," Stacy Asher, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.stacyasher.com/Art301_01_USF.html.

topics she has included like the Black Power movement, labor unions and workers' rights, and anti-war protest.

Another example of a helpful introduction to social design is Shana Agid's course *Worldmaking: Design and Designing in Social and Political Context* at Parsons The New School for Design. Here, as in her "Social Design and its Political Contexts" article, she explicitly recognizes the need for a structural analysis of power in relation to design. Agid explains in her syllabus that the course will be beneficial for those interested in "designed things and systems," and

> will draw on key analyses of contemporary and historical relationships of power and cultural meanings, including Cultural Studies, Queer and Feminist Theory, Critical Prison Studies, and Visual Cultural and Design Studies, to help interpret and think through these questions.[66]

While influenced by other disciplines, Agid still roots the course in design theory and frames it within the context of the burgeoning field of social design. It is exciting to see that it is open to non-design majors and can also be counted toward a minor in Gender Studies, demonstrating a commitment and accountability to the breadth listed in the course description. Agid asks students to question what constitutes "problems" or "solutions" and how some projects "might both limit and expand capacities for design."[67] If social design students are asked to study these areas and precedents that Asher and Agid present, I strongly believe they will be able to ask more thoughtful and critical questions of their own work and that of their peers.

Graduate programs are also making an effort to bring social design into their departments. Four years ago, the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) developed

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[66] "Worldmaking: Design and Designing in Social and Political Context," Parsons Course Catalog, accessed December 1, 2014,
http://www.newschool.edu/ucc/courseDetail.aspx?id=ULEC2220&CourseKey=ULEC2220&CourseOpenTo=NMO%2cNMR%2cNMN&PageIndex=0.
[67] "Worldmaking," Parsons Course Catalog.

the Master of Arts in Social Design program, defining itself as an "intensive one-year, interdisciplinary, practice-based graduate program that prepares aspiring social designers to understand and address the challenges facing society."[68] Andrew Shea, a former teaching assistant of Bernard Canniffe at MICA, turned his MFA thesis project into the book *Designing for Social Change: Strategies for Community-Based Graphic Design*, published in 2012. The book is rooted around the premise of a guide, described on the back cover blurb as "ten proven strategies for working effectively with community organizations," which also makes it representative of much of the current available literature geared toward designers interested in any variant of social design.[69] Twenty case studies are included to round out this "toolkit" (a favored concept of the design world) providing guidelines for designers who would like to engage in community-based design.

Though a ranking system does not yet exist for social design programs, U.S. News and Report ranks the prestigious and expensive private education at MICA as the third best graphic design program in the country. One of the well-known and well-respected graphic design scholars and faculty at MICA, Ellen Lupton, created the illustrations for Shea's book. Renowned designer and theorist, William Drenttel, also wrote a sharp foreword to the book, asking designers to look past programs to systems, to focus on the people they're working with instead of preaching to the design community, and to measure the effectiveness of their actions.[70] The visible support of both of these

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[68] "Social Design (MA) | MICA," Maryland Institute College of Art, accessed November 20, 2014, http://www.mica.edu/Programs_of_Study/Graduate_Programs/Social_Design_(MA).html.

[69] Andrew Shea, *Designing for Social Change: Strategies for Community-Based Graphic Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012).

[70] William Drenttel, foreword to *Designing for Social Change: Strategies for Community-Based Graphic Design* by Andrew Shea (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012), 6-7.

prominent designers may have contributed to the book's warm reception, which ushered it in to various classrooms across the U.S.[71]

Shea admits that it may be "unrealistic to set specific goals at the outset of community-based projects" and acknowledges these types of projects are not as clear as a list of guidelines might suggest. In his preface he says the conventional service provider mentality of presenting a poster or logo as a solution won't cut it: "Instead, designers need to find ways to get to the root of the problem, which is often part of a larger, messier system of issues that need to be dealt with."[72] The case studies he includes in the following pages notably describe both successes and failures. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, this book still feels reductive in its short and sweet selections that provide little historical, political, and social context for the "larger, messier system of issues" he previously describes.

Shea's approach to create well-defined strategies feels very comfortable in contemporary design discourse (hence the previously mentioned interest in Paul Polak's "12 Steps out of Poverty"). Part of the general job description for graphic designers is to be adept at translating difficult and muddied information into clear and accessible visual communication, in both text and image. In the issue of social design, however, the very topics in which designers are engaging demand more nuance; this act of simplifying may actually be more of an act of reduction. In the essay "Why Design Education Must Change," Donald Norman agrees:

> Many designers are woefully ignorant of the deep complexity of social and organizational problems. I have seen designers propose simple solutions to complex problems in education, poverty, crime, and the environment. Sometimes these suggestions win design prizes (the uninformed judge the uninformed).

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[71] A few schools that have included this text on a design syllabus in the past three years include The University of Colorado Denver, University of Texas Arlington, and Virginia Commonwealth University.
[72] Shea, *Designing for Social Change*, 10.

Complex problems are complex systems: there is no simple solution. It is not enough to mean well: one must also have knowledge.[73]

This is the crux of it. It is not enough to ask students to "do good," if the criterion for this is only grounded in what the instructor prescribes as beneficial. If students are expected to participate in socially engaged work, there needs to be a shift in the foundation for that education. This transition, or addition, cannot simply be about switching clients from corporate to non-profit and expect that design students are equipped to (or interested in) working for any sort of social justice. Additionally, how can we expect students to have any thoughtfulness in approaching activism, community organizing, or aid work beyond a warm embrace of NPOs, if grassroots approaches to social engagement or activism within institutionally supported social design frameworks are entirely inaccessible?

Design researchers Christopher Crouch and Jane Pearce prioritize understanding the material and ideological positioning of the designer in terms of social, cultural, and political contexts. In their book *Doing Research in Design*, they write:

> "This may seem obvious, this idea of both acting and being acted upon, but until it is understood how we have been constructed as designers or researchers by this process and can articulate it to others, we cannot fully understand how to research."[74]

Crouch and Pearce align with Agid in acknowledging designers' expanding roles—working on complex, systemic issues—as a call for designer-researchers to follow with expanding their contextual understanding of how symbolic power manifests into material power.[75] This is perhaps where a more critical design practice enters the fray, to

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[73] Don Norman, "Why Design Education Must Change," Core77, November 26, 2010, http://www.core77.com/blog/columns/why_design_education_must_change_17993.asp.
[74] Christopher Crouch and Jane Pearce, *Doing Research in Design* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012): 6.
[75] Crouch and Pearce, *Doing Research in Design*, 10.

help disarticulate the power structures we have internalized and expose their contradictions, thereby providing a new critical perspective on our daily lives and our possible futures.[76]

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[76] Dylan Rodríguez, "The Political Logic of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), 36-37. Inspired by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Dylan Rodríguez presents the idea of disarticulation where "the multilayered, taken-for-granted state practices of punishment, repression, and retribution form common notions of justice, peace, and the good society" are unraveled, or more specifically, "the displacement of a powerful, socially determinant 'law and order' common sense" [emphasis added].

Chapter 3: Broadening/Unsolving

A conventional design process can be roughly simplified to: identification of the problem → research → ideation → iteration → solution → (maybe) analysis/evaluation. In a social design context, the commitment to this end result of landing at a solution is problematic and breeds self-importance and reckless optimism. In some instances, the answer might not be a "fix," but rather the resolution that this is not a space for design at all, but for a different kind of engagement.

In this light, I see critique of this field not as negation but as an opening up of possibilities for those invested in design. In sociologist Craig Calhoun's foreword to the book *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, he embraces this notion of production in activist scholarship: "Crucially, activist social science may inform both activism and social science by pursuing critical knowledge. Critique is not the same thing as just objecting to the way things are; intellectual criticism is not mere complaint."[77] Calhoun continues:

> Precisely because of attention to the possibilities of change, critical social science is often focused on the ways in which power, privilege, and self-interest as well as ideology and limited vision reinforce actually existing patterns in social life and limits on potentially positive change.[78]

I wish to set up a framework in which to design and to imagine alternate possibilities. I don't see the work I do to be an end-game, but a process of expansion.

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[77] Craig Calhoun, foreword to *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (GAIA Books in association with University of California Press), xxiv, accessed November 15, 2014, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z63n6xr.
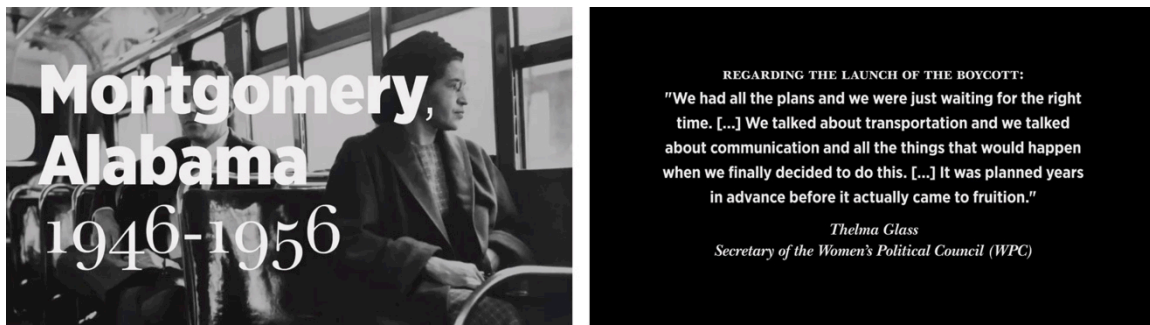[78] Calhoun, foreword to *Engaging Contradictions*, xxv.

Figure 6:   Screenshots from *Rosa Parks*, 5:08, 2013. Images provided by author.

My creative practice of the past two years consists of a series of projects that deploy the formal techniques of graphic design as a means of leveling a critique. My work asks: what are the ethical implications of design objects and practice in social, cultural, and political terms?[79] Some topics of these works include: exploring what and who is erased in popular and palatable stories of activist icons—such as Rosa Parks—that eliminate the methodical, long, and incremental collective actions and deeply rooted rage behind movements (*Figure 6*);[80] poking holes in the presentation or assumption of the Archive as an objective authority through my creation of an archive with exaggerated interventions to highlight levels of distortions and power;[81] and looking at how graphic design (present in logos, signage, environments, etc.) might function to support a visual hegemony that conceals the violent displacement of a community during gentrification.[82] I will discuss two projects in greater detail: *White* and *Stories Against*.

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[79] Matt Malpass, "Between Wit and Reason: Defining Associative, Speculative, and Critical Design in Practice," *Design and Culture* 5, no. 3 (November 1, 2013): 333–56.

[80] Becky Nasadowski, "Rosa Parks," *Vimeo* video, 5:08, December 15, 2013, https://vimeo.com/81939764.

[81] "(Adjusted) Archive of Popular Feminist Theory," Tumblr, last modified November 17, 2013, http://feministamazon.tumblr.com.

[82] Becky Nasadowski, "Top 5 Reasons to Open a Business in Logan Square," *Vimeo* video, 2:31, December 15, 2013, https://vimeo.com/81938752.
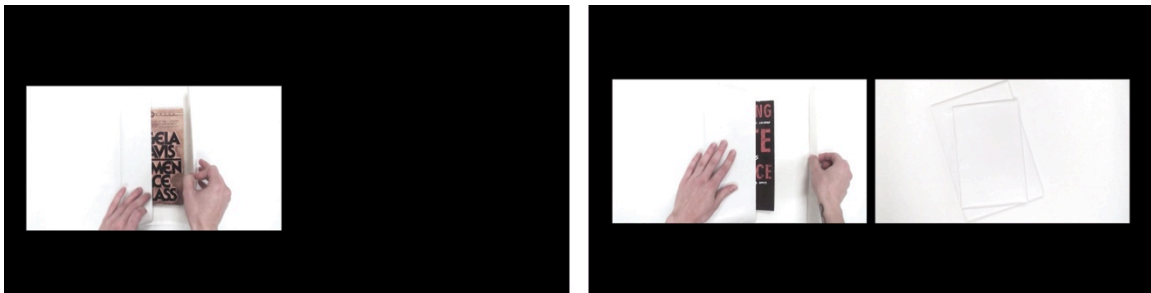
White

Figure 7:   Screenshots from *White*, 2:06, 2014. Images provided by author.

In *White*, I started with some of the themes I've discussed previously in this paper, those of reduction and erasure (*Figure 7*). Designers' strength is often in taking complex information and translating it for greater legibility. Here, I am asking viewers to question what gets lost in translation. This short video, about two minutes with no sound, shows white hands methodically wrapping books about critical race theory, oppression, and state-sanctioned violence in white paper.[83] The books—including Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*; Joy James' *Resisting State Violence*; Angela Davis' *Women, Race & Class*; and Andrea Smith's *Conquest*, among others—are then stacked in a neat pile where the content remains in tact but sealed off, foreclosed of possibilities for further interaction. This foreclosure yields tidy, presentable packages that are ripe for display, but not engagement. Erasure is not just an omission, but also an action; in this way, conflict is rendered illegible and privileges of whiteness directly contribute to this flattening of complexities.

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[83] Becky Nasadowski, "White," *Vimeo* video, 2:06, November 7, 2014, https://vimeo.com/111240237.

Stories Against

Stories Against (storiesagainst.com) is a response to a common omission in social design rhetoric. Many writers on social design fail to acknowledge that it is possible to do grassroots design that emerges separate from and even in opposition to the state. The anarchist thinker Errico Malatesta provides a helpful summary of the state as an entity that flows from the public to the individual:

> Anarchists […] have used the word State […] to mean the sum total of the political, legislative, judiciary, military and financial institutions through which the management of their own affairs, the control over their personal behavior, the responsibility for their personal safety, are taken away from the people and entrusted to others who, by usurpation or delegation, are vested with the powers to make the laws for everything and everybody, and to oblige the people to observe them, if need be, by the use of collective force.[84]

In *Conquest*, scholar and activist Andrea Smith articulates the need, and presents concrete suggestions, for alternatives to antiviolence movements that depend on the state as the solution to alleviate violence—specifically violence against women of color. These mainstream movements she refers to often analyze and strategize only on the basis of patriarchal control without acknowledging violence as an inseparable tool of racism and colonialism. Much of Smith's text links to and informs my understanding of social design not as an inherently malevolent act, but often one that simplifies or flattens conflict, which in turn forces consensus and obfuscates colonialist relationships. The conveniently ahistorical and apolitical *Blue + You* campaign best exemplifies this flattening of conflict. Smith quotes Karen Warren:

> Dysfunctional systems are often maintained through systematic denial, a failure or inability to see the reality of a situation. This denial need not be conscious, intentional, or malicious; it only needs to be pervasive to be effective.[85]

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[84] Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy* (London: Freedom Press, 1974), 17.

[85] Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005), 17.
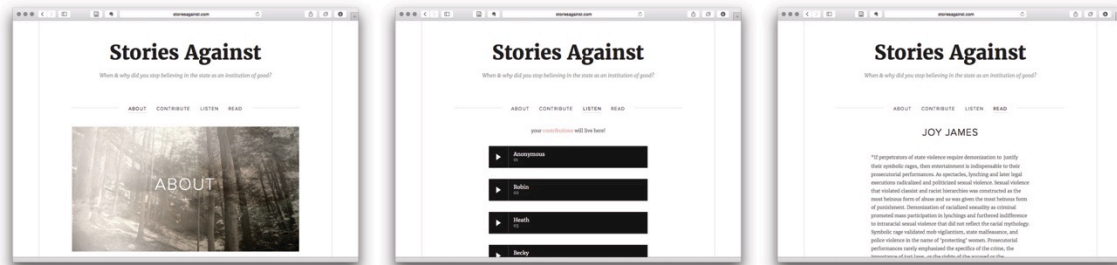
Figure 8:   Screenshots from *Stories Against* website. "Stories Against," accessed April 25, 2015, www.storiesagainst.com. Images provided by author.

Stories Against is a project positioned to actively grow. It is a website that collects and archives personal narratives that respond to the question "When and why did you stop believing in the state as an institution of good?" (*Figure 8*) These stories—ranging from inequality in public education to police brutality held unaccountable—are then put in dialogue with theorists that deepen our understanding of the intricacies of state violence and coercion. This project recognizes theory and personal experience as co-dependent—stories proving that emotions and everyday experiences are important forms of knowledge while theory helps us make sense of, and connect, our stories. This method helps to visualize the violence not as isolated incidents, but as one intentional system. Postcolonial and transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes:

> Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity.[86]

This quote demonstrates how feminist theory has influenced this project, and also helps me situate a few themes at play in this work:

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[86] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 78.

1.   *It acknowledges the state's role in both a violent history and present*. Classes and organizations framed around social design ask designers to create positive change, which often excludes identifying and naming the root of some of the systemic issues they approach (i.e. poverty, racism, homelessness, police and community relationships, etc.). This project helps to visualize acts of state-sanctioned violence as one intentional system that cannot be ignored if attempting to work for social change.

2.   *It challenges dominant epistemologies through encouraging articulation of everyday experiences as valid modes of knowing*. Storytelling and emotions are often regarded in the academy as illegitimate and illegible; *Stories Against* creates an alternative project that supports an affective approach to politics, placing stories on equal footing with more traditionally (though not always) recognized theorists. Feminist social theorist Patricia Hill Collins articulates two types of knowing—both knowledge and wisdom—as co-dependent: "In the context of race, gender, and class oppression, distinction is essential. Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate."[87] I also value Collins' articulation and belief of "personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy" as "central to the knowledge validation process," and strive to reflect the same values in my own work.[88]

3.   *It serves as a free resource hub*. On the website's blog, I post quotes from theorists along with copies of their texts available for download. In this way, it

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[87] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 1990), 208.
[88] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 215.

functions as another alternative, explicitly political space: it is the creation of a space where I assert that knowledge should be free and shared.

Both *White* and *Stories Against* stand alone, serving two different functions; though they complement and enrich the other when paired together.
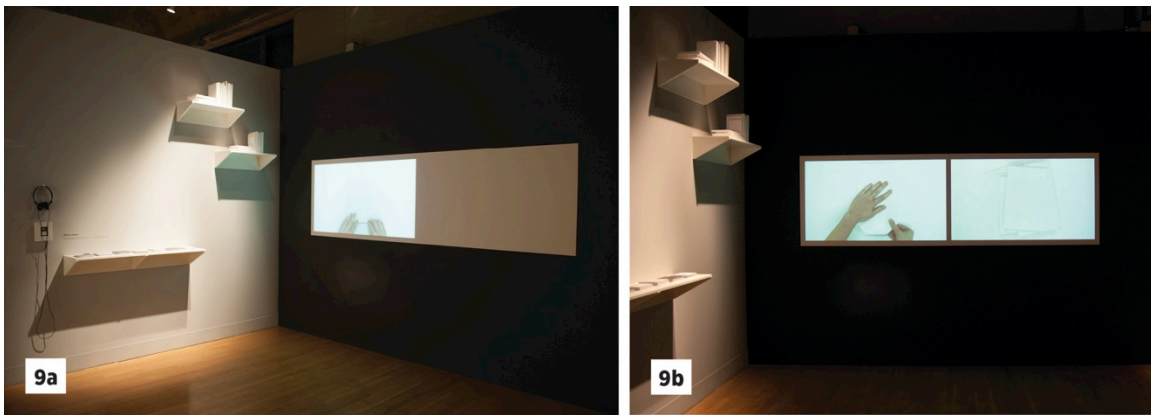
Exhibition

Figure 9:   **9a**: Photo from *how to listen* exhibition, April 2015. Photo courtesy of the Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin.
9b: Photo from *how to listen* exhibition, April 2015. Photo courtesy of author.

I exhibited these two projects together for the 2015 MFA Design Thesis Exhibition entitled *how to listen*. *White* functions as the core visual, playing on a loop against a dark wall (*Figure 9*). I took the white books from the video and displayed them on two white shelves against a connecting light gray wall, out of reach from gallery visitors. This presentation reiterates the attractive but inaccessible nature of these tidy packages displayed like they belong on a home décor blog. In order to translate *Stories* from a website to a spatial experience, I divided the audio and the text into two distinct

components. I placed the recordings of the stories on an iPod that I hung on the wall along with headphones. I pulled seven different quotes from the reading portion of the website and designed one template to be used for all of them. These were printed on small square cards, about five by five inches, with the reverse side on all of them inviting viewers to share their stories through visiting the website or calling a number to leave a voicemail. I placed this series of seven cards on a long shelf just below the headphones.

White functions as my representation of the social design field and *Stories* works to counter this attitude. I arranged the three items—the headphones, the cards, and the video—to interact with one another. If one is to listen to the stories while reading the text, it creates an experience similar to the one I facilitated on the website. The storytelling provides an affective approach to the printed quotes, encouraging viewers to read and locate the theoretical grounding in front of them for these personal experiences they are simultaneously hearing (*Figure 10*). Alternatively, the headphones and video pairing is another possible experience, where the visitor might choose to engage with *White* while attaching the stories to it as a soundtrack. I am equally interested in this approach as I am to the projects in isolation. I want to show that these social design efforts are indeed connected to stories of violence, even if the individual stories, theory, and social design endeavors all *seem* like disparate elements—they are all linked and should be viewed as components of a larger narrative.

Figure 10:   **10a & 10b**: Photos from *how to listen* exhibition, April 2015. Photos courtesy of the Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin.

WRITING

How can we further interrogate these problems I have presented throughout this paper in a sustained manner that could be transported into the classrooms of design? My response to this question was to generate a compilation of texts into a critical reader for social design in order to provide crucial perspectives from outside of the often insular design field, informed in particular by feminist, anti-racist analysis from areas such as anthropology, gender studies, cultural studies, and grassroots activism. As designers begin to broaden the field and engage with complex social issues, we need new frameworks for our design education that incorporate various disciplines to deepen our analyses, better our praxis, and envision new possibilities for change.

The proposed reader fulfills three needs: First, it challenges existing assumptions about social design. From exploring various syllabuses, in educational settings across the U.S., students are currently being taught that social design is "good"—or at least preferable to working for large corporations, for example—but don't seem to be urged to question this feel-good assertion.

Second, although the majority of contemporary design readers contain contributions from designers writing about design, designers are not necessarily the

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people whose education best equips them to critique social design. Designers do not need to reinvent the wheel; we need to learn from other disciplines and practitioners who have a rich history of engaging in these systemic issues. We need to rid ourselves of presumptuous expectations that designers can and should easily and painlessly be able to saunter into new complex territories.

Finally, the reader interrogates other possibilities for change. It asks the question that is typically missing from professionalizing programs: what kind of work should designers who desire change at a more radical, systemic level be doing? I do not situate these texts as *guidelines* for social design, but rather seek to establish some context and intellectual footing for social engagement that is currently lacking from discussions of "design for good." I appreciate and would like to reflect activist anthropologist Charles Hale's introduction to the *Activist Scholarship* reader: "the essays gathered here are intended to till a field, not to fill a container."[89]

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[89] Charles R. Hale, introduction to *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. by Charles R. Hale (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 3, accessed November 15, 2014, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z63n6xr.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Contemporary social design literature is often rooted in the premise that it is possible to provide clear guidelines or ready-made toolkits in order to achieve social justice. Despite designers in this field stating their commitment to social change, their awareness of sociopolitical dynamics and histories of conflict is often insufficient. As a field, social design remains oblivious to or unwilling to look to the useful lessons that can be learned from activists and scholars in other disciplines. Minimal scholarship currently exists that acknowledges race, class, and gender positioning in social design and what bearing it might have on power relationships throughout the design process.

It is important for designers and educators to acknowledge more of the gray areas in order to ask difficult questions and enact their practice in a more responsible and ethical manner. Not every designer-NPO partnership, for example, is "good," and good intentions do not always outweigh actual effects. Social design can function as an alibi in this way, hiding behind well-intentioned actions, but failing to see the consequences of an ill-informed commitment to social justice. We would do well to remember queer theorist Jasbir Puar's words, "Violence, especially of the liberal varieties, is often most easily perpetrated in the spaces and places where its possibility is unequivocally denounced," as it reminds us of the importance of critically examining the guiding assumptions behind and unintended consequences of good intentions.[90]

It is crucial for designers in academia and practitioners in the field to be more purposeful and thoughtful about language, as well as honest about their intentions in using design in these alternative (read: non-commercial) ways. Greater specificity means a more rigorous level of necessary critique and a stronger understanding of

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[90] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 24.

accountability. If educators are serious about design providing a "social good," it is essential that we broaden our scope of analysis and critique.

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