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Carey, Hillary, Costes, Chris and Bansal, Mihika

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Gleaning Racial Justice Futures:

Past promises and an unequal present

Hillary Carey, Chris Costes, Mihika Bansal

Visions of the future world we want to create help align people toward change. Such concepts are present within some racial justice advocacy groups. Still, we propose that the work of attaining equity might benefit from more use of future visions as an additional tool toward creating systems change. To understand how visions of possible futures show up in current racial justice work, we analysed the communications of fifteen organizations. We used website content to discern how these organizations describe the worlds they want to build—a technique to gather information without requiring any additional effort on their part. The collected future visions were a small portion of the online material, but they provided rich depictions of systems change. From looking at how organizations described possible futures, we identified themes about future objectives. We found making freedom, health, and safety more accessible for all people to be the most common intention for these futures. This analysis helps us begin to imagine how tools of futures studies might evolve to accommodate justice-oriented world-making. We found that such tools would need to account for the complexity of imagining futures from an inequitable present day: taking account of historic structures and acknowledging the plurality of present-day experiences.

Keywords: racial justice; futures; communication; liberatory futures; design justice

Introduction

Social design movements like Transition Design emphasize collaborative, long-term visions of preferable futures as a tool for enacting complex systems change. These shared, long-term goals can align competing constituents who may find common ground in a longer time horizon and help to overcome resistance to disrupting the status quo (Irwin 2015). As designers engage in community-based, systems-change work, building out visions of the world we want to achieve through long-term social changes can be a strong leverage point for shifting systems (Meadows 1999, Irwin 2015, Tonkinwise 2015, Ramos 2017, Escobar 2018). Such visions of equity, justice, and sustainability can guide and align design interventions in the present by backcasting to identify strategic opportunities to intervene.

Racial equity work is an active and continuous practice in systems change. However, in working toward racial justice in the United States, clear and specific descriptions of what a racially just society might look like are rare. Historian and activist Robin D. G. Kelley implores, “Without new visions, we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down” (2002: xxi). Describing the outcome of such a transition is complex and nuanced. We can draw glimpses of that future from justice-centred organizations and critical race scholars. Yet, as far as a lasting image of a future world, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s iconic “I Have a Dream” speech continues to serve, sixty years later, as perhaps the most salient vision of a racially integrated and equitable world (Washington 1993).

A benefit of bringing designing into social impact spaces is the ability to imagine and explore ideas about the future: “Prototyping, prefiguring, speculative thinking, scenario-building, doing things differently, failing, and then starting all over again are all core components of design education” (White 2020:34). But design, as a field, still has much work to do in learning to work in equitable ways with communities. Being creative about learning from activists in this space indirectly, rather than asking for their time, was a way to practice equity-centred methods. Further, we can learn to adapt design tools toward liberatory engagement as we carefully practice equitable design.

Table 1. A list of the coded themes that occurred most often in the descriptions of future visions. They are sorted by the number of organizations that made use of the code. We provide an example quote to illustrate each code.

Coded Theme	#Orgs	Example Quote
Policy	9	"...we envision a world in which children's rights and well-being are protected as they migrate alone in search of safety." (KIND)
Equality	8	"...align our beliefs, actions, and institutions with the principles and values that this great nation was built on. In this, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" will belong to all in equal measure and without failure." (New Detroit)
Harm	7	"...a world in which no group or individual suffers from bias, discrimination or hate." (ADL)
Past Promises	7	"Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all." (Policy Link)
Justice	6	"By virtue of being born, each of us has the absolute right to people-centered humane justice, mediation, resolution and violence prevention." (Dream Defenders)
Term: America	6	"...to fulfill America's promise of a caring, inclusive and just democracy." (Advancement Project)
Term: Future	6	"What's the future we are fighting for? The Freedom Papers illustrates our vision for a world that serves the everyday needs of its people - the one we all deserve." (Dream Defenders)
Race / ethnicity	5	"Protecting net neutrality, stopping government surveillance of black activists, achieving meaningful diversity and inclusion behind the scenes in Silicon Valley." (Color of Change)
Wellbeing	5	"...enable everyone, especially people of color, to be economically secure, live in healthy communities of opportunity, and benefit from a just society." (Policy Link)
Ideology	4	"...the opportunity to create and nurture a new personal life story, a new community story, a new organizational story – a whole new race narrative." (New Detroit)
Police	4	"...a reimagined vision of policing in America — one that limits the scope, power, and responsibilities of police." (ACLU)
Structural	4	"Everyone will have equal access to affordable, high-quality health care, and racially disparate health outcomes will end." (NAACP)
Compassion	4	"...to create a more human and less hostile world for Black people, and all people." (Color of Change)
Economics	3	"We must have an economy based on clean energy and the needs of the many – and not one based on war and destruction." (Dream Defenders)
Power	3	"We envision a future where people of color are free – where they can thrive, be safe and exercise power." (Advancement Project)

Of note was that most of the future visions we identified were familiar rather than speculative or hard to imagine. Everyday futures include phrases such as, “to create a more human and less hostile world for Black people, and all people” (Color of Change), or “We can live in a world where people of colour aren’t lost to gun violence and incarceration” (Live Free USA). These are not worlds that are difficult to understand. For many of us, this world is already available. Extending access to justice to *all* people is the crucial aspect that positions this world in the future. A second primary pattern was that most organizations focus on governance issues as a lever for systems change rather than personal or ideological change. For example, the ACLU states, “a reimagined vision of policing in America— one that limits the scope, power, and responsibilities of police.” This emphasis on governance connects to an understanding of structural racism that is built into the history of the United States.



Figure 2. One of the affinity diagrams from our research team's online synthesis sessions.

Implications: Plural Presents and Respect for the Past

This research activity revealed that many of the visions of what a racially just future might look like are based on acknowledging the plurality of experiences of the present-day and fulfilling promises of the past.

Plural Presents: Descriptions of the Everyday

Far from speculative, many of the future visions call for a world that already exists for many, but not all. The organizations used instances of the everyday alongside broader and more utopian descriptions of a better world. For example, a comprehensive vision of the future would be “a future where justice is real” (Color of Change). While this vision is powerful, situating actions at the human scale can add realism. An instance of describing the quotidian is represented here: “SONG expects that members will not hinder the self-determination of others through acts of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, hatred, and intolerance” (Southerners on New Ground). With the latter statement, organizations can begin enacting and prefiguring such a future immediately. A strength that design brings to futuring practices is to bring broad concepts about the future into tangible specificity (Kossoff 2011). To design in the everyday context means creating tangible visions that offer a glimpse of what life could look like in the future (Candy 2010).

However, a potential pitfall for designers when creating visions of daily life in the future is to design for a universal and normative experience. In our current world, situated in modernity, capitalism, patriarchy, and whiteness, it is easy to assume existence within this world is a neutral, shared experience (Vieira de Oliveira & Martins, 2018:106). Social impact designers need to recognize that current worlds are not the same for everyone. In examining common visions of the future in International Relations, Mitchell and Chaudhury (2020) “reject the Euro-centric notion that there is ‘a’ or ‘the’ single future, just as we reject the notion of a single world, now or never” (p. 310). In the same way, when designing for the everyday, designers need to be mindful that they are not creating realities that work to secure a “Eurocentric,” “white-centred” everyday. It is crucial to consider how a future vision centers the voices of those that live on the margins and creates an equitable future (Ortiz Guzman, 2021). Does it work to secure a hegemonic future or establish a vision of diverse, multiple worlds?

In social justice work, where inequality and structural oppression are in primary focus, we need to take care to ask whose present is centred and cared for as the starting point for these visions of the future. Throughout the organizations' websites, there is an emphasis on creating a safe world for everyone, where all people live free from gun violence, where everyone can see themselves represented in media and board rooms. The NAACP website speaks of human needs: "Every person will have equal opportunity to achieve economic success, sustainability, and financial security." This future vision is necessary because those worlds do not currently exist for all people.

Reckoning with the past to make space for the future

History defines the nature of the futures in progress in the visions we collected: the goals, limits, and whose experience receives attention. However, there is less time spent considering the past and its influence on the future within most design practice. For example, designers have adopted the Voros Cone (Hancock & Bezold 1994; Voros 2003, Dunne & Raby 2013) to map the many ways futures might unfold from the present. However, this model doesn't incorporate experiences or perspectives of the past— variables that might dramatically shift the cone's layout were they to be included (Kozubaev et al. 2020). The organizations we studied not only consider the past, but their futures directly reckon with it.

Many organizations call on language from America's foundational claims of freedom and equality to shape the purpose and structure of the future they work toward. For example, Advancement Project seeks "to fulfill America's promise of a caring, inclusive, and just democracy," the language of fulfilling a promise explicitly identifies the uneven distribution of these *common* freedoms. Policy Link also considers the importance of the past, "It requires that we understand the past, without being trapped in it... This is equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation." These organizations imagine that the future can be a world that upholds the vows of the past.

Design has begun to explore methods reconciling the past, such as the ways that Transition Design incorporates the Multi-Layer Perspective (Geels 2005) and Causal-Layer Analysis (Inayatullah 1998). It is essential to see that while there is a value in creating a new world that expands on current freedoms, the communication explored here reveals the priority of resolving the past. The wisdom of these visions comes from people embedded in the struggle, where the violence of the past is still present in the everyday.

Next Steps

This research project is the beginning of several possible research strands. It would be fruitful to repeat this analysis with a set of local organizations to identify a wider variety of types of intervention and action than the national set we collected for this project. Additionally, we will begin conducting interviews with racial justice organizers to understand their internal use of future visions, information not captured by our study of public-facing communications. Ultimately, our research will facilitate organizations to develop their own visions of the futures they want to achieve and to make those visions feel vivid and tangible.

Conclusion

These findings may help shape how social designers draw inspiration from people who are already doing important work. Analysing websites is a way to learn from the community without asking for more labour. This research revealed how much inspiration can be found from secondary sources, even in issues as current and applied as racial justice. Even in this small set of visions, essential questions about design futures arise: How is the past included? Do we recognize multiple everyday experiences? Futures Studies should seek to develop tools and processes that are more appropriate to social justice projects.

We see racial justice organizations as collectives who are actively practicing the application of theory and action. These organizations are on the ground, persuading others to work towards systems change through their calls for equitable everyday lived experiences. We hope that design futures practice can demonstrate the additional value of motivating people through visions of the better world that is possible.

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