

BECOMING

verb. to come to be;
develop or grow into

WOKE

noun. a state of being aware; knowing what's
going on in the community, related to racism
and social injustice

Abstract

This thesis explores how we might design authentic, meaningful engagement with another person as a means to begin to see structural racism. The goal of the engagements is to open a process of deepening awareness of racism in the present cultural environment and the influences of bias and privilege in our lives, *Becoming Woke*.

The work proposes an embodied design practice—what is made tangible through this practice is embodied through designed engagements, rather than creating a physical artifact or specific methodology to be followed. The designed engagements were enacted in bars throughout New York City. This practice asks designers to not only put things out into the world for others to use, understand, or adopt, but to actively embody our work as a way of being in the world.

The process that emerged through this practice is described in the accompanying *Guide for Engagement*. *The Guide* is to help others explore creating productive engagements around a difficult topic and offers an alternative form of training and educational programming on racial equity. *The Guide* aims to encourage and empower people to engage with others around race, more frequently and in the informal spaces of our everyday lives. Through increased engagement, we create the opportunity for *Becoming Woke*—to be more aware of how racism, bias, and privilege operate in our daily lives and impact our environment.

Keywords

structural racism, implicit bias, privilege, awareness, embodied practice, engagement

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Overview

I begin this work by describing events over the last several years and how they have brought the forces of structural racism more acutely into national attention in the United States. Yet, there is a lack of awareness and understanding around the influence of systems of beliefs and behaviors are ingrained into our cultural environment and through individuals, perpetuate racism.

This thesis is structured around a concept I term *Becoming Woke*. It explores how we can actively enter into a process-focused, not outcome-driven, space of becoming more aware of the existence of structural racism and the influence of bias and privilege. Through social science research and recent events, I explain some of the challenges we face when trying to understand and change structural racism ingrained into our systems, and the critical challenge of simply making us aware of its very existence. Through these challenges, I develop two key criteria for my project.

The project looked at how we might create meaningful and productive engagements to develop awareness around issues of race, bias and privilege. The engagements were designed and enacted in bars throughout New York City. Emerging from this practice is a process of guiding principles for an embodied practice that are described in a distributable guidebook.

Inspired to use design as a process of discovery, rather than output, and its ability to grant permission to act otherwise, the project of this thesis explores the possibility of design as an embodied practice.

I. Becoming Woke

Structural Racism

In February 2012 Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in Sanford, FL by George Zimmerman. Martin was an unarmed, 17-year-old, black male returning home from a local convenience store. George Zimmerman claimed self-defense and under Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, was released by police that same night without being charged. Amid national protest, an investigation was eventually brought and Zimmerman was tried. A year later, in July 2013, he was acquitted of all charges.¹ The protests formed around the country in the wake of this decision. People rallied not just for the unjust death of Trayvon Martin, but outrage at a larger, systemic problem in which the lives of black victims are treated with less concern and less protection by the criminal justice system as compared to white victims. It gave birth to the now well-known Black Lives Matter movement and was a key event that helped to catapult the issue of structural racism into national attention. The shooting of Trayvon Martin is just one name in a series of now household names of unarmed black men who were fatally shot and their killers questionably acquitted of any wrongdoing, including Oscar Grant, Eric Gardner, and Michael Brown.

Structural racism in the United States is not a new phenomenon. As a country that was largely built on the institution of slavery, we have a long history of racial inequity and sordid civil rights battles. However, much of the racism we face in our country today is different from the legal, official, and explicit racism of the pre-Civil Rights era. The structural racism today is not visible in official laws and policies, blatant acts of racially motivated violence, and openly professed racist beliefs. It is largely "hidden," ingrained into the

¹ "Shooting of Trayvon Martin." Wikipedia.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Travon_Martin.

cultural and political environments in ways that are more complex to identify.

Larger social and political patterns help illustrate these structures. As we see in the story above, leading national awareness on this issue is a deeply racialized and shameful criminal justice system. We suffer from a rate of incarceration so high and so concentrated, "we are no longer incarcerating the individual, but we are incarcerating whole social groups," specifically people of color and most acutely black males.² We are currently on track to incarcerate one in three black males born today.³

Presented less often in the media, but equally as damning, racial inequity is evident in education, economics, employment, politics, housing, and healthcare. It has been shown that non-white Americans attend the most poorly funded schools⁴, are regularly turned away from jobs because of their perceived race (by hiring managers seemingly oblivious to this bias)⁵, are specifically targeted for disenfranchisement policies⁶, are corralled into the worst housing available (by unspoken policies), are redlined from receiving mortgages to be able to purchase homes (illegally)⁷, are given less serious and detailed health care at doctor's offices and emergency rooms (also by care providers oblivious to their bias)⁸. Even in our everyday public encounters, it has

² Lay, Jackie, Bruce Western, Kasia Cieplak-Mayr Von Baldegg, and Ta-Nehisi Coates. "The Racism of Mass Incarceration, Visualized." *The Atlantic Monthly*. The Atlantic, 11 Sept. 2015. Web.

³ "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." Criminal Justice Fact Sheet. NAACP. Web.

⁴ White, Gillian B. "The Data Are Damning: How Race Influences School Funding." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 30 Sept. 2015. Web.

⁵ Bertrand, M., Chugh, D., & Mullainathan, S. (2005). Implicit Discrimination. *The American Economic Review*, 95(2), 94–98.

⁶ Berman, Ari. *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America*. 2015. Print.

⁷ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The Case for Reparations." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, June 2014. Web.

⁸ Betancourt, J. R. (2004). Not Me!: Doctors, Decisions, and Disparities in Health Care. *Cardiovascular Reviews and Reports*, 25(3), 105–109.

been proven that on average adolescent black males are perceived by a stranger as being 4.5 years older than their actual age and as a result are less likely to be given the benefits we afford perceived innocence and immature decision-making associated with childhood.⁹ Not to mention the countless accounts of discriminatory customer service and heightened surveillance people of color report experiencing every day throughout the country.

We are able to know this real and severe racism through these stories and statistics, yet in 2016 it is rare to find a person who is openly racist or even, despite media attention on the issue, to read about explicit acts of racism on a regular basis. How do we have such pervasive racism, without racists?¹⁰

⁹ Goff, Phillip Atiba, Matthew Christian Jackson, Brooke Allison Lewis Di Leone, Carmen Marie Culotta, and Natalie Ann Ditomasso. "The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 106.4 (2014): 526-45. Web.

¹⁰ For more information, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's seminal work on this issue, *Racism Without Racists*, details the rise of color-blind racism as the forces that perpetuate it.

Becoming Woke

Becoming *verb.* to come to be; develop or grow into¹¹
Woke *noun.* a state of being aware; knowing what's
going on in the community, related to racism
and social injustice¹²

I chose to use the title *Becoming Woke* for this thesis to emphasize two things. *Woke* is a term that was first used in 2008 by singer Erykah Badu. In her song *Master Teacher* she dreams of a world full of master teachers but at the same time is “woke” to the reality of a world full of structural oppression and racial inequality. The term was adopted into mainstream use on social media and often seen in connection with #BlackLivesMatter. In this context, being woke indicated understanding the systemic injustice and a willingness to fight against it.¹³ It has since become somewhat by diluted by use in pop culture, but also still indicates its original usage. *Becoming* emphasizes the work in this thesis is asking us to develop, to grow towards a preferred state, without reaching an end goal. In this process, the goal is not to for us to **be** woke, but to open to being in a constant state of development.

We in the United States are in need of becoming more aware about the state of our community and creating deeper understanding about the ingrained racial inequality that permeates our environment.

¹¹ *becoming*. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/become>

¹² *woke*. Urbandictionary.com <http://www.urbandictionary.com/woke>

¹³ Pulliam-Moore, Charls. "What Does 'Stay Woke' Mean And Why Is Everyone Saying It All Of A Sudden?" Fusion. January 8, 2016.

II. What We Do Not Know

***Slap-In-The-Face Awareness:
Implicit Bias and Our Hidden Beliefs***

There is widespread and obvious racial inequity, but most individuals remain unaware of its presence in our everyday life. One of the explanations for this is implicit bias.

Our cultural environments heavily influence our belief systems and behaviors. Social sciences and psychotherapy tells us we constantly absorb information from our surrounding environment and automatically store it away without consciously processing it. This creates automatic associations and stereotypes stored in our subconscious. We access and rely on this information all the time, much more than we access our conscious, “rational” mind for help in making decisions. Whether it’s 90% of 99% unconscious, “experts agree that the ability to have conscious access to our minds is quite low.”¹⁴ In order to make decisions and act efficiently these automatic belief and behavior systems are acquired effortlessly and are necessary, but once set can be very difficult to remove.¹⁵

¹⁴ Banaji, Mahzarin R., and Anthony G. Greenwald. *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. New York: Delacorte, 2013. Print.

¹⁵ Widely researched and popularly reported about by behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman and his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, and social sciences journalist Malcolm Gladwell and his book, *Blink*.



1. The System: Our Cultural Environment

We all belong to a “cultural environment”. This includes history, country, social class, political system, family, community, etc.



2. Influence

We are born into this environment. It influences our opinions, ideas, modes of acting, and how we judge and connect with other people.



3. Time passes

As we develop inside the environment, our belief systems behaviors become more ingrained and set over time.



4. We feed back into the cultural environment

Our beliefs and the products of our actions, in turn, affect the environment around us



5. Reinforcement

This feedback reinforces and strengthen the same beliefs and values



6. Feedback Loop Dilemma

Once we have become aware of something we want to change within this feedback loop, such as subconscious bias, it can be very difficult to do.

Fig. 1: Model describing the influence of our cultural environment on our belief systems and behavior.

Part of the information we absorb includes beliefs and feelings about specific social groups and leads to unsubstantiated biases both for and against specific groups. These beliefs are termed “implicit biases.” Tony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji, the social scientists that first defined the term implicit bias and are considered some of the leading researchers in the field, published this explanation in their 2013 book, *Blindspot:*

Hidden Biases of Good People:

“What are the hidden biases of [good people]? They are—for lack of a better term—bits of knowledge about social groups. These bits of knowledge are stored in our brains because we encounter them so frequently in our cultural environments. Once lodged in our minds, hidden biases can influence our behavior toward members of particular social groups, but we remain oblivious to their influence.”¹⁶

Implicit bias differs from the more commonly known explicit bias in that these are biases and stereotypes that *all people* hold, but do not actively perceive with our conscious, reflective mind. Our implicit biases may be, and often are, in direct contrast with the values we hold in our conscious mind and try to practice in our everyday lives.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

What We Do Not Know

Greenwald and Banjali and their colleagues developed a tool called the Implicit Association Test, or IAT, in 1998. The IAT is generally accepted as the most accurate and widely used method for measuring and understanding implicit bias. Originally developed to examine racial biases, it has also been translated into use for a wide array of biases, including gender, weight, religion, politics, etc. The test asks users to categorize two categories of groupings (African-American and European-American; Male and Female; Flower and Insect) with a series of specific attributes ("good", "bad", "safe", "violent", "logical", "emotional", "ugly", "pretty"). The test measures how quickly you are able to categorize certain groups with a specific set of adjectives. It concludes that faster responses demonstrate stronger automatic associations and slower, more difficult pairings mean weaker automatic associations.

Over the years researchers have collected hundreds of thousands of results and the test has revealed overwhelming prevalent and strong biases against people of color. This is true for both white and non-white test subjects. In addition, when results reveal bias against people of color, almost all users claim these results are at odds with what they consciously believe.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Nosek, Brian A., Mahzarin Banaji, and Anthony G. Greenwald. "Harvesting Implicit Group Attitudes and Beliefs from a Demonstration Web Site." *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 6, no. 1 (2002): 101-15.

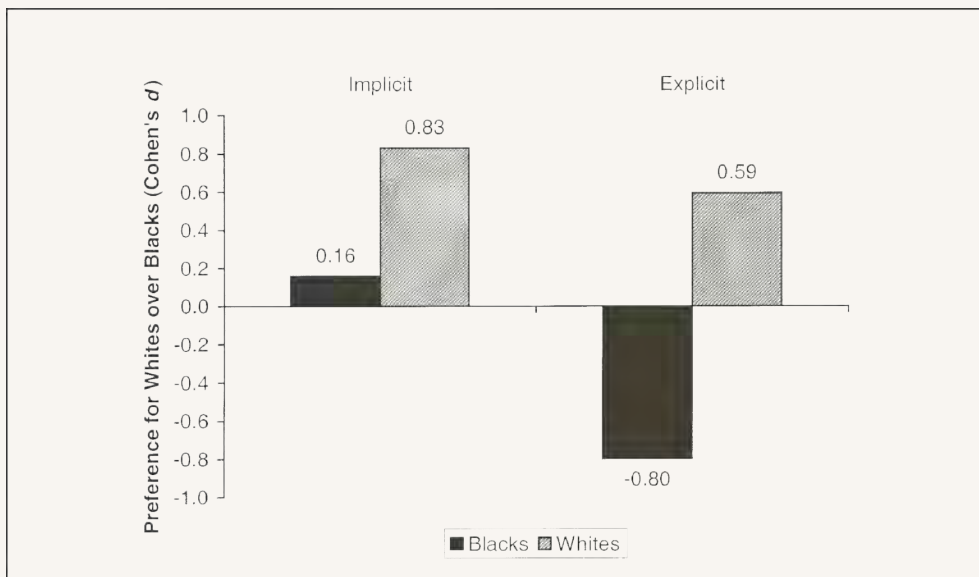


Fig. 2: Results from 103,316 white respondents and 17,510 black respondents between October 1998 and April 2000. Implicitly, both black and white respondents show preference for whites. Explicitly, blacks express overwhelming preference for their own race while whites express a less strong preference for their own race.

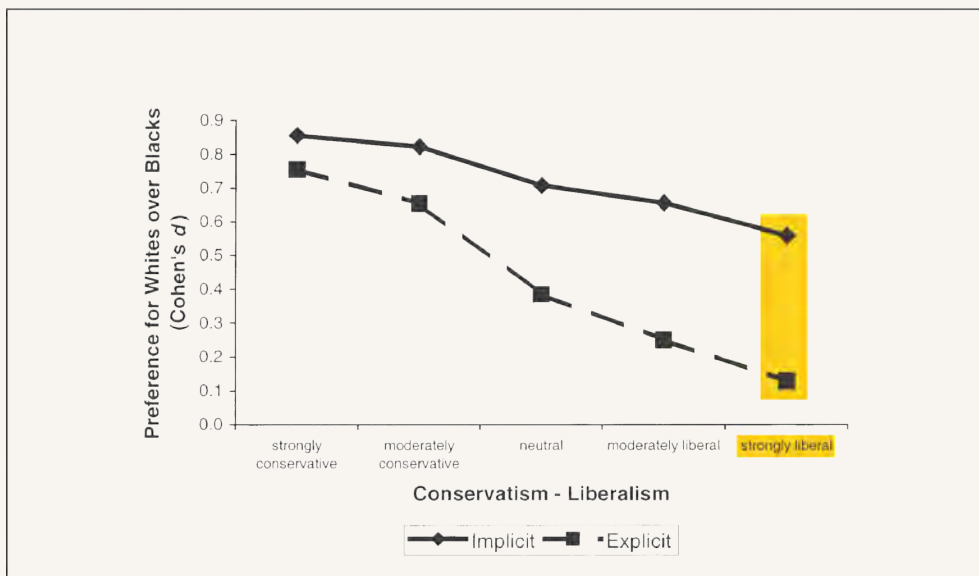
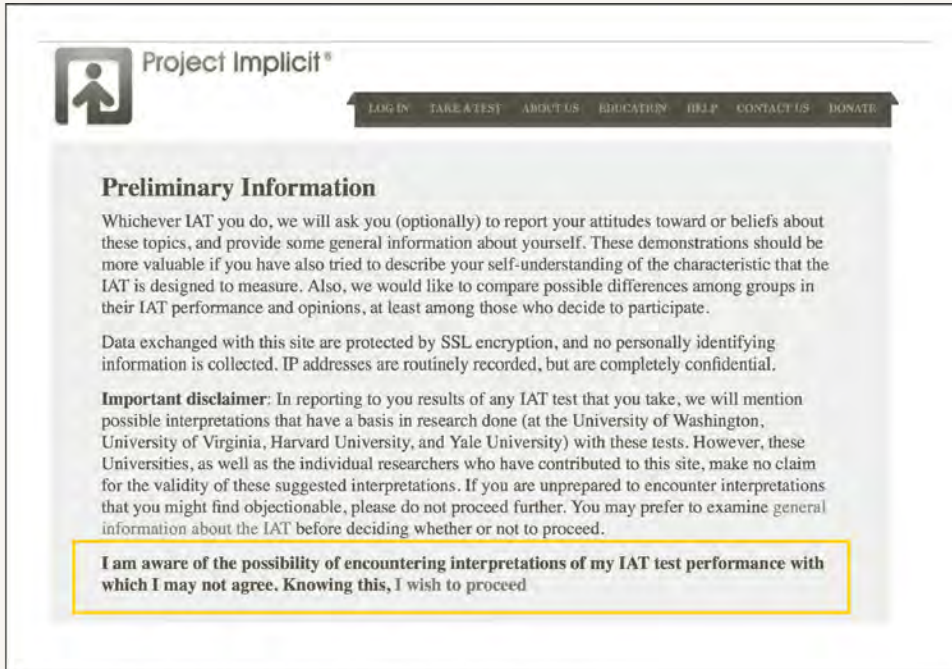


Fig. 3: Results from 103,316 white respondents and 17,510 black respondents between October 1998 and April 2000. The more explicitly liberal one's political beliefs are, the greater cognitive dissonance (contradictory things to be true) they suffer around race and bias. Highlighting added.

While the IAT and associated social research reveals to us the existence of bias, what we now know after 20 years of developing the work is that this revelation is ineffective at actually helping us to change or understand our biases. Greenwald and Banjali admit that after years of conducting this research, the awareness created by the test does little to change beliefs and/or behaviors. Despite what they hoped continued research could show, they concede in their 2013 publication that there are still very few effective strategies in place to combat our implicit biases.

Before taking the test participants are warned on several occasions that bringing implicit bias into your awareness can be troubling and that you may disagree with the test results. You have to actively acknowledge the disclaimer: *"I am aware of the possibility of encountering interpretations of my IAT test performance with which I may not agree. Knowing this, I wish to proceed."* before you are even allowed to proceed into the test. These precautions indicate the strong reactions people can experience after taking the IAT.



The screenshot shows the Project Implicit website interface. At the top left is the Project Implicit logo, which consists of a stylized human figure inside a square. To the right of the logo is the text "Project Implicit®". A dark navigation bar contains the following links: "LOG IN", "TAKE A TEST", "ABOUT US", "EDUCATION", "HELP", "CONTACT US", and "DONATE". Below the navigation bar is a section titled "Preliminary Information". The text in this section explains that users will be asked to report attitudes and beliefs, and that data is protected by SSL encryption. An "Important disclaimer" follows, stating that interpretations are based on research from the University of Washington, University of Virginia, Harvard University, and Yale University, and that no claim is made for the validity of these suggestions. At the bottom of the disclaimer section, a yellow-bordered box contains the text: "I am aware of the possibility of encountering interpretations of my IAT test performance with which I may not agree. Knowing this, I wish to proceed".

Fig. 4: Warning before taking the Implicit Association Test online.

In order to better understand reactions to the test, I asked a group of 20 users to take the IAT and performed an anonymous interview about their emotional reaction to the results and impact it had on their mindset. While there were some variations, in general people had fairly negative, emotionally charged reactions to the test if they were told they had automatic preference for European Americans over African Americans. If the test gave you a result of little or no bias, people generally agreed, but were still skeptical about this format of testing being accurate.

When users were told they had little to no automatic preferences.

“Seems accurate to me! I'm curious what the collective results are.”

“Agreed with it.”

“I believe that you could replace the images of black people and white people with the color green and the color red - and it would be just as difficult. The test seems to program you toward certain pattern associations and then switch those patterns. I'm not sure this test really gets to implicit bias. I think the reason I scored so highly is that I played a lot of computer games growing up and my hand/eye coordination and response time is on-point.”

When users were told they had a high to moderate preference for European Americans over Black Americans, they were disturbed and also disregarded the accuracy of the results.

“A bit saddened by how my errors and pace led me to this result. Regardless, I recognize this as a “test” and trust my inner respect, pride, and love for all races equally.”

“It’s hurtful to see it written so definitively about me personally. Especially when I felt myself struggling with relating the black faces and the good words, or the white faces with the bad words, that was really painful because I care so much about this issue, and I don’t believe that anyone is “good” or “bad”. It makes me wonder where this came from, if it is because of representations in the media that I struggled with that? Or like the questions at the beginning suggested, my community growing up?”

People find it hard to accept results that claim to measure something so deep and personal about their beliefs after such a short, limited exercise. It can be upsetting and frustrating that the test claims to identify something about you that you yourself do not know. This shock generates a negative reaction that causes users to want to distance themselves from the results of the test, and even the subject matter. Even when users recognize there is validity in the results, revealing such a significant factor about themselves was hidden from their awareness can cause concern, paralysis, and disempowerment. I call this “slap-in-the-face” awareness and it ultimately does not help us to be better equipped to understand or work to mitigate our biases.

Insight #1: Slap-In-The-Face

Using external testing and *telling* people about their personal implicit bias and hidden belief systems triggers negative emotional reactions. People react with disbelief and/or feelings of disempowerment. This testing, while revealing, is ineffective at helping develop deeper understanding to combat and change our relationship with racism and bias.

Knowing vs. Knowing: White Privilege and Personal Experience

As part of my research I attended a workshop on group dynamics and process. We were studying theory and skills about communication, facilitation, and listening in order to design better communication and outcomes when working with diverse groups of people. Although this workshop was not explicitly about race, the topic came up in one of our group sessions. One of the participants was a white female who had recently moved to the United States from England. She complained to the group about how since arriving here, she was offended that the term “white privilege” was insinuated “against” her. What did she ever do? What was she responsible for? Why should she have to answer to a label that puts her into a box, inside a culture she doesn’t understand, and a country she doesn’t belong to? She described the need to defend herself against this offensive label.¹⁹

Her discomfort with white privilege opened up a heated dialogue in the group of participants, which included liberal political activists and black women. She was angrily told by another participant (also white) that it was ignorant and hurtful for her to discount the privilege she enjoyed as a result of the color of her skin. Not just here in the U.S., but everywhere people of color experience systemic discrimination and lacked the access and resources that white people experience. She was told she needed to be able to empathize with what it would feel like to be a person of color. She needed to understand that there was so much denied to people of color, simply not being one meant you enjoyed “privilege.” One woman made the point as a black American, she does not get to stand up and say, “Don’t put me in a box, don’t put a label on me.”

¹⁹ Lipton, Mark. *Laboratory in Group Facilitation, Intervention and Process*. February 16–19, The New School. New York, NY.

The English woman explained that she also had difficulties and struggles in life. She did not feel it was her responsibility to be treated as if she was privileged, when that was not *her experience* of the world. She understood that there is discrimination and not all people are afforded the same privileges and access to resources, but she did not come from a privileged background.

Some of the obvious takeaways from this encounter are how a question about race and privilege can ignite strong reactions and turn a discussion immediately into a debate; the emotional anger and hostility that come (often justifiably) with these topics; and how ineffective our automatic reactions are at helping someone to *see* or *understand* the issue any better.

In the following weeks I followed up with people who were in the room, including the facilitators and the British woman. As I evaluated the collective and individual experiences, I continued to reflect upon how we understand our personal experience.

In the interaction, everyone in the group was asking the woman to see her privilege through the systemic issues and other people's experiences. When she had a chance to speak, it was important for her to tell her story and validate her opinion based on her lived experience. The more people discounted her reaction to "white privilege," the more she looked to defend herself with examples from her story that supported her lack of privilege. No one thought to approach creating understanding about the issue by asking her questions about her own experiences.

The woman was able to concede the intellectual arguments about systemic injustices, but systemic injustice was not something that she would take personally or hold responsibility for, especially as a non-American. By seeing

racism as only systemic, only through theory and as a product of society outside of lived experience, allowed an intellectual knowing of the idea of white privilege to be true, without having to understand or notice it in our own life. Without being asked to identify personal, experiential knowing, the problem is depersonalized and allows dissociation with privilege. This contributes to discouragement that there is anything we can control to create change.

When we approach the issue as an intellectual pursuit, we are able to examine bias with our conscious, reflective mind, but intellectual knowing does not help eradicate biases in our subconscious. Someone with good intentions working to create a more equitable environment, can more readily identify and “fix” external factors and issues and completely avoid self-reflecting on their own biases and experiences of privilege.

In addition, I would argue that by making it a formal, intellectual or social structure, rather than a part of our personal experience, it impairs our ability to empathize with the very personal experience on the receiving end of prejudice. It allows us to believe in the myth of personal responsibility: that despite systemic racism, people can overcome the challenges associated with race if they work hard enough or are able to ignore negative influences.

After this insight, I wanted to explore how we could ask people to reflect on their personal experiences, not as a means to confirm their lack of bias or privilege, but to open space that allows them to be more aware of their biases and privilege.

Insight #2: Knowing vs. Knowing

As we seek to build understanding and awareness of our bias and privilege, there is a distinct difference between knowing something to be true intellectually, and knowing something to be true because you can point to specific experiences in your life.

Project Criteria

In exploring how we might move from a state of relative unawareness or indifference about structural racism and the influences of bias and privilege in our lives, into a state of *becoming woke*, the following two insights became key criteria guiding the work.

1. The awareness was self-directed knowing. It came through self-discovery, personal willingness, and at a self-directed pace and;
2. Knowing was connected to our everyday, lived experience and not couched in scientific test results, academic theory, or formal training

Expert Interviews

I conducted interviews with two influential and experienced bias trainers and advocates, Eva Vega²⁰ and Jacob Tobia²¹. My interviews and subsequent conversations with them formed key insights and support for the development of this work. Specifically, they shared some of their most effective strategies when leading workshops and what they feel needs to be addressed in the field. I will summarize some of the most important takeaways from our conversations.

First, and most importantly, was that empathy was the most important tool one can use when trying to engage people. Both Eva and Jacob stressed this. As a designer this might sound like an obvious tool, but it was surprising to hear in this space. There is a general trend in diversity and activism work to describe what *other* people are experiencing in order to educate and train about issues of bias and inequality. Eva was adamant that when running workshops, especially with a skeptical audience, trying to understand where someone is coming from, walking in their shoes, and validating their experiences was more effective at having any future traction with the audience.

Jacob discussed the importance of sharing his own story in order to help people open up and feel more comfortable when working with a group unfamiliar with the topic. Eva discussed the need for a more effective conversation tool, similar to the “5 Whys” tool used for need finding, to help facilitate awareness of biases. She also spoke about the strong tendency for people to automatically turn from discussion into debate—let my facts disprove your facts—and that these are some of the most unrewarding and exhausting ways to engage around these issues.

²⁰ Eva Vega Diversity. <http://www.evavegadiversity.com>.

²¹ Jacob Tobia. <http://www.jacobtobia.com>.

III. Engagement

The issues discussed here are critical social concerns—disenfranchisement, education quality, housing rights, economic opportunities, and human lives. The stance I am taking, based on the social research and political and social realities, is that underlying all of these concerns are fundamental beliefs and behavior patterns that work to preserve racial inequality. These patterns maintain an historical and self-perpetuating system. It exists regardless if recognized it or not.

The need I am looking to address through this work is how to create deeper awareness, understanding and acceptance of our own beliefs and behavior patterns in accessible, everyday spaces, not through social research, academia, or political activism. Using a design-led process, this work looks to:

- Create understanding that is relatable, personal, and relevant to our lives.
- Avoid methods that are “slap-in-the-face” and allow space for self-directed awareness that has deeper and more lasting effects.
- Bridge the gap from intellectual knowing, to deeper reflection and awareness.

By creating personal connection with the issues, the work moves from just knowing that racism, bias, and privilege exist to empowering action and change. If we are looking to innovate to be able to make real change on this issue, we must first have more widespread understanding of the need and seed the willingness for necessary change to take place.



Fig. 5: At Berg'n in Crown Heights

*I Would Like to Have a Conversation About Race: Designing Engagements*²²

Becoming Woke uses an embodied design practice to explore how we might become more aware and accepting of the influences of racism, bias, and privilege in personal belief systems and cultural environments. It seeks to do this through designing meaningful and reflective conversations around personal experiences with race, bias and privilege.

Through an embodied practice, this work proposes a way of being in the world, embodying the product of the design through the designer rather than through an externalized product or service offering.

I decided to design and enact these engagements in bars throughout New York City. I will explain the initial design and specific methodology that emerged for engaging in bars. I will then highlight some of the key learnings that led to future iterations on the engagement process.

²² See Appendix A for prototypes that preceded the central project of this thesis.

Initial Design

The design of engagements relied on the project criteria and the following three important principles.

1. Participants are to engage in interactions in the space of everyday life. It is not an engagement designed for an official training or formalized spaces. The engagement sets out to connect abstract concepts of structural racism and subconscious bias with personal beliefs and actions. For this reason, it is meaningful to ground the experience in familiar, comfortable spaces rather than formal or academic settings. Additionally, the strategy seeks to normalize conversations about race and privilege to the extent participants begin to feel these are topics of conversation that could and should be had on a more regular basis, without the need for formal education or training.
2. The invitation to participate should have a very low barrier to entry. A goal of this work is to engage participants who would not normally have an opportunity to openly discuss these topics. The situation should appear approachable, welcoming, and safe. While designed to be inviting and encouraging, individuals must choose to engage with full knowledge of and interest in discussing the topic of race on their own. These engagements are to both *discover* information about the presence and understanding of bias and privilege *and* provide space for people become more aware of their influences. Regardless of if the latter outcome is realized, the former can be achieved.

3. Most critically, the engagement is explicitly not a moment for teaching, education, or “showing”. It is a mutual sharing of information and no one participant has more “knowledge” than the other. Participants are made to understand no one is an expert on anything except their own experience in this topic. The participants are engaging in a process of *self-directed awareness and learning*. Participants are encouraged to share experiences, moments of awareness, and realizations, but not in a way that would require the other person to adopt the same understanding.

Methodology

I created an initial set of “conversation guidelines” and suggested questions to develop meaningful conversation, geared toward deeper, self-directed awareness (See Appendix B). To enact the engagements, I invited strangers to have a conversation with me in the space of a bar. The venue of a bar was chosen because of the role it plays as a social space in which people are open to conversation and one of the few public places that people are perhaps even looking to have conversations with a stranger. The engagements were intended for people who do not have a lot of exposure or are not already thinking about the issues of race, bias, and privilege. By bringing engagements into unplanned spaces, rather than inviting people to a prepared context, I was able to engage with a more diverse and unrestricted audience.

The bar provided unexpected elements that factored into the overall process. The secondary activity of having a drink proved to be an effective way to relax participants into the conversation and the activity allowed the conversation to “take a break” when necessary. It also provided a way of timekeeping, without having to set up an overly formal structure. One drink was, on average, a good measure of time to maintain a conversation. The seating at a bar provided the right amount of intimacy to have a semi-private one-on-one conversation, while maintaining personal space and the more casual atmosphere of being in public space.

I discovered that visiting during the time period of 4-6pm is when an establishment is generally crowded enough there are people around to talk to, but not so crowded it is difficult to take a seat at the bar and leave a chair open next to me. This time period also has a casual atmosphere and is inviting for conversation. However, from 4-6pm on a weekday, there are more males willing to participate than female. This was

balanced with spending more time on weekends, when more females are present and willing to sit down with me.²³

I sat down at the bar, a space designated to talk to other patrons around you, and ordered a beer from the bartender. After asking, I hung a sign on my back and taped one to the chair next to me that invited a person to sit down next to me to have a conversation about race. Placed on the bar in front of me were a series of coasters that outline the conversation's guidelines. The aesthetic of each of these elements is clean and simple, using earth tones you generally find in bar settings, contrasted with a deep, bright blue used to catch attention and invite participants without being loud or ostentatious.

²³ The fact that I am a female, fairly young, and generally outgoing and friendly by nature all play an important factor in the success of being able to engage a diverse group of participants in this space. From an outside perspective, I am likely perceived as safe, non-threatening and open to being approached by males, females, and a wide age range.



Fig. 6: Coasters on bar outlining the conversation guidelines.

When a participant approached me for a conversation, I asked them to agree to the conversation guidelines, which include:

- This is a conversation about personal experience, not expertise.
- Be genuine and share authentically.
- There is no right or wrong thing you can say.
- Ask questions for clarification and reflect back what you hear.

A key part of these guidelines was ensuring that they are both described at the beginning of the conversation and also modeled continuously throughout the conversation. If an engagement strayed in unproductive directions, lightly laying a hand on a specific guideline helped to redirect attention or remind participants of the suggested structure. This process both facilitated the conversation and provided a mini-workshop for building the capacity to use this process of communicating in future conversations.

I began each conversation with the question, “What is your experience of race in the United States?” This question was deliberately open to allow people to think how they define race and where they place themselves in relation to that definition. A series of follow up questions were also on hand. These questions are not always necessary (I had hour-long discussions exploring personal experiences of race and privilege simply from the opening question). However, the spirit imbued into the questions, including asking about feelings and emotions, directing clarification towards personal experience, encouraging participants to reflect on their cultural backgrounds, and focusing on values were a part of every conversation.

On average, conversation lasted for 45 minutes. Many participants wanted to continue the conversation for longer periods of time, but I found the effort of engaged, active listening and reflection to be diminished after an hour of conversation. I needed to end the engagement in order to preserve the impact of the initial encounter.

I engaged in about 20 “substantial” conversations with people of all races, genders, age ranges, and socio-economic classes. Bars, if you go to enough of them, draw in a truly diverse range of people from all backgrounds. Not all people who approached me wanted to engage in a conversation about race. Some simply wanted to know about what I was doing and others wanted to give me their opinion about what I was doing, without participating.

Twice, managers of the establishment (after the bartender had allowed) have asked me to remove my signs and/or leave the bar. Twice (different from previous examples), patrons in the bar expressed their dissatisfaction with my attempt to “cause trouble” by initiating conversations that were inappropriate and unnecessary to have while “out at the pub”. These

instances illustrate the discomfort and reluctance to engage this topic and highlight the need to build tools and capacities to enable understanding of the topic. I was, however, approached by many more people who, without wanting to engage in conversation, wanted to tell me they thought this was an important initiative to be taking on and developing.

After having a conversation, I recorded what happened into the voice recorder on my phone or wrote it down in a journal. In trying to keep the engagements casual and intimate, most were not captured with any kind of photo, video, or audio recording. It was important to capture the stories and insights that were shared. I also needed to record my reactions to the engagement. I used this material to help me reflect and iterate for future engagements.



Fig. 7: Reservoir bar, Manhattan, New York



Fig. 8: Berg'N bar, Brooklyn, New York

Outcomes

These engagements varied from the extremely productive, insightful and meaningful connections to short and shallow to aggressive and hurtful. Regardless of location, the invitation to have a conversation about race caused a notable reaction and my presence was widely noticed, whispered about, photographed, etc.

There were almost always people who wanted to sit down with me. Only once did no one approach me and in that instance, as soon as I left two people came after me to ask me about the work outside of the bar. Many patrons were genuinely interested in exploring the topic. White people were surprisingly interested in asking me if something they did or said was “racist” and also wanting validation for their experience of struggle as a white person. People of color, who spoke to me, were supportive of the work and grateful I was doing it. This being said, I was aware of scorn and laughter directed at me from people who never approached me.

The actual conversations could be extremely insightful and connective. Several participants expressed appreciation and amazement for being able to have such a meaningful and eye-opening experience, completely unexpected when they decided to come for a drink. Others commented that they thought the work being done was important, even if it was not impactful to them directly. The smallest group of people did not “engage” but did come up to me and let me know they were directly offended by my prescreens and thought it was an inappropriate topic. This happened three times and all three people were white.

Engagement



Fig. 9:

"When you sat down at the bar next to him (her companion) I thought to myself, what is that white girl doing sitting down next to the black guy at the bar? I don't see race myself. I don't think about it. I don't always fit in to one category or the other. But I would have never thought to say this out loud to anyone, not even him. But now that I am telling you, I can see how much I do actually think about race."



Fig. 10:

"Music has been a great bridge in unifying myself with different races. You know, race is not something that I care about... But I have a great story about other people seeing me as white... I was long boarding through Brooklyn and a group of black kids yelled at me, calling me a "Peckerwood"... Later, I looked it up and realized that "Peckerwood" is a racial slur for white people. And I'm okay with making fun of myself, but at the same time was he discriminating against me? But I look back and I laughed at it. I thought it was hilarious. Wow... the privilege that I took... I didn't even think of that as privilege. I guess it is real privilege. I don't know one derogatory term for white people."

Engagement

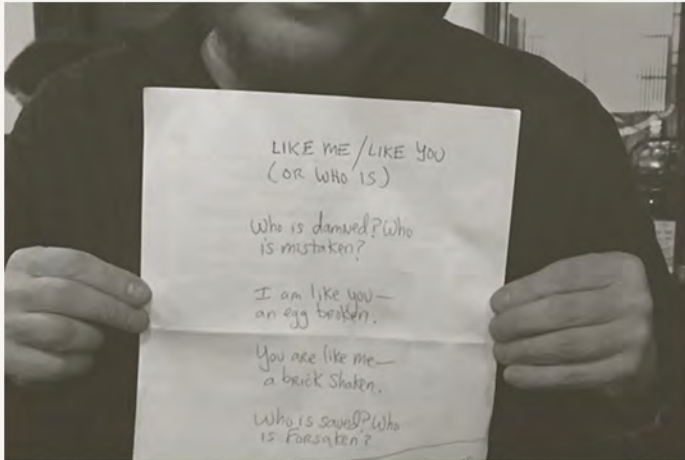


Fig. 11:
Like Me/Like You
(Or Who Is)

Who is damned? Who
is mistaken?

I am like you—
an egg broken.

You are like me—
a brick shaken.

Who is saved? Who
is forsaken?

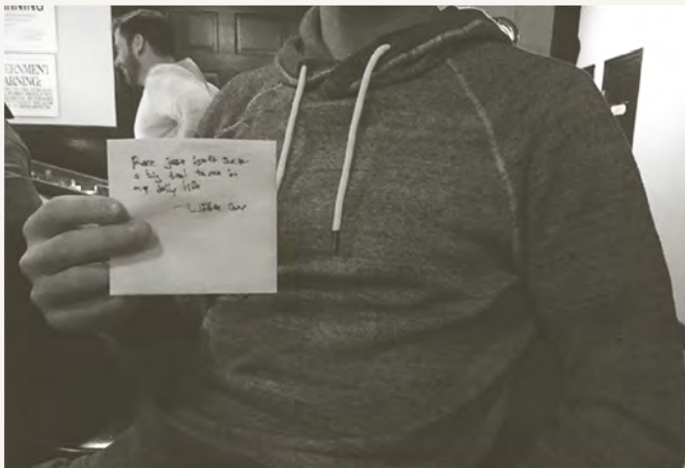


Fig. 12:
Race just isn't such a big
deal in my daily life.
—White Guy



Fig. 13: Instagram post from patron who did not approach me.

Fear

Enacting these engagements was terrifying. I cancelled the first two times I planned to go out. Once I made it to an actual bar, I was relieved when the bar said, “No, you cannot sit here with that sign on your back.”

In the midst of this trepidation I decided to make explicit what my fears were and I wrote the following list:

- People will be angry.
- People will want to argue with me.
- People will think this is inappropriate or dumb.
- I won't know what to say.
- Our conversation will be unproductive.
- Someone will say something and I won't know how to respond.
- I will say something and the other person won't know how to respond.
- People will be offended that I am even trying.
- People will try to make me feel bad or guilty about who I am and where I'm from.
- People's perspective will be different from mine.

This was a critical moment for my work. Making this fear explicit showed the exact thing I was trying to overcome with this work. We are fearful to have conversations about race because of the emotional reactions it may cause and what it may reflect about myself. Saying this “out loud” emboldened me to begin the work, to create tools to work with emotional reactions and be willing to be vulnerable in order to deepen my own understanding. After enacting several engagements, I was more comfortable going out, but I never entered into one of these situations without some level of fear and nervousness.²⁴

²⁴ People reacted to these situations because of my vulnerable situation. If this work were to be carried forward being in such a vulnerable position

Vulnerability

The most impactful conversations are those that are truly able to provide new awareness and acceptance of how bias and privilege operate in our life. This was most likely to happen when participants were able to share personal experiences or thoughts they would not normally disclose in the course of a conversation. The engagement that most often causes these moments is when one participant, more frequently myself, is able to share openly and honestly about an experience or thought in a way that exposes genuine vulnerability. This act establishes trust and safety in the space of the conversation. It also sets an expectation, or provides permission, for the other participant to be more vulnerable in their sharing.²⁵

Another important part about building trust with another person is that, in my experience, it allowed me to be more honest with myself. You might assume you are able to be honest about your beliefs and behaviors, but this work explores the research that tells us that we are actually unaware of much of our beliefs and behavior. When someone admits something, especially something particularly unpleasant, it grants permission to admit this might be true for you as well.^{26 27}

²⁶ This admission should come in a way that is genuine and truly about oneself. It is not the intention of an insight to make someone else feel they are “less than” because they do not see these influences in their own lives.

²⁷ There are implications for future study on the roles fear and vulnerability play within an embodied design practice. There is much research in psychology and sociology on the benefits gained by situations that engage these emotions. These elements have also been incorporated in other fields of embodied practice to be looked at. As this work continues to explore an embodied design practice, it will be important to examine how and why designers would (or would not) try to pursue bringing fear and vulnerability into the design.

Reflection Providing Validation Without Agreement

Often, white participants in the conversations were seeking validation for personal experiences of hardship and triumph. They felt their struggle was being devalued by the discussion of white privilege. It was challenging to maintain neutrality when trying to create greater awareness around white privilege. One tool that was helpful in these situations was the guideline to reflect back the experience to the participant. Reflection was able to provide self-validation, using their own words and stories, without my opinions and thoughts coloring the feedback. However, hearing the story repeated back also created space for us to reflect deeper. In some instances this generated insight, for both participants, about the prevalence of privilege and systemic racism.

Already in the Work

The engagement was less fruitful if the participant had already engaged in deep and serious work looking at bias and privilege in their life. The engagements were designed for audiences who do not engage with these issues with any kind of regularity. I think the strategy still has potential to produce meaningful outcomes, as they did for me, but the relatively short and casual conversation for someone who had already done a lot of reflection on the topic did not prove the most effective engagement for producing new levels of awareness or acceptance.

A Guide for Engagement:

Transforming How We Think and Talk About Race

Accompanying this thesis book is a secondary book, *A Guide for Engagement: Transforming How We Think and Talk About Race*. As I collected insights, I continued to refine how engagements were being created and facilitated. It became clear there was a need to communicate out what I was learning and practicing. I had used traditional design-led processes to craft these engagements, but what was occurring in the work was different. It was an embodied practice. It was design being used to engage and explore how to turn sensitive, difficult conversations, into meaningful or transformational ones.

At this point in the thesis, I struggled with how to share this information while maintaining the importance of what I was exploring as embodied practice. I want to underscore here that what this thesis explored is an embodied design practice, through creating engagements around the topic of race. As designers, we are inclined to focus on products we put out into the world for others to use and what I am trying to propose here is that as designers we can embody the design we are trying to put out in the world, rather than putting it into an object or methodology.

Given this struggle, I produced the accompanying booklet, *I Would Like to Have A Conversation About Race: A Guide for Engagement*. The guide outlines my approach to creating and sustaining meaningful engagements. Reading through it provides my overall process—including how to prepare yourself with information and internal reflection, how to create space for meaningful conversation to occur, how to engage, facilitate and maintain conversations, and suggestions for how to strengthen learning or understanding that came from the conversation with reflection tools.

While the guide lays out a fairly detailed process, it attempts to be a critical design tool as well. It uses the formal design media of a guidebook, something we are all familiar with as a traditional designed output. But the information contained within deemphasizes methods, tactics, and strategies that allow for you to easily adopt this practice.

The translation of this work into a guide is discussed in more detail in the below section on the design practice. This is truly a first attempt to think about how we translate and pass on the tacit, embodied knowledge of our design practices. And more importantly, how we can accept and acknowledge the importance of the embodied practice, not “methods” that describe a practice, in the ways in which we discuss and share our work. It serves as a case study on transitioning design practices from explicable production-based practices to framing design as embodied practice that produces equally valuable, but intangible, goods such as awareness and social connection.

As I continue to iterate on what this practice means and how it is translated, particularly in fields of design for social impact, the guide will most certainly transform into different framing and outputs. For now, it serves as, hopefully, a helpful, purposeful means to *encourage* and *empower* people to engage with others around race, more frequently and in the informal spaces of our everyday lives. Through increased engagement, we create the opportunity for Becoming Woke—to be more aware of how racism, bias, and privilege operate in our daily lives and impact our environment.

Back into the Field

The Guide also serves an important role in bringing the design work back into the field of racial equity building and diversity training. As a proposal on how to more effectively address the issues of race, bias, and privilege. Through one-on-one, informal interactions it provides an alternative to traditional, large-scale training and diversity efforts that are commonly seen on institutional levels. It advocates for personal connection, self-reflection, and courageous conversation as an effective tool to build equity.

In the course of this work I met with two administrators and two professors at The New School who all work deeply with diversity initiatives. *The Guide* stands in contrast to the models presented in their varying contexts that emphasize formal training and “educational” approaches to understanding issues of race and bias. Partners expressed frustration at policies and training events that were required by the institution and did little to improve equity issues. Events were poorly attended unless mandatory, and even people passionate about these issues were reluctant to attend. A future iteration of this model could be exploring how individual, meaningful conversation in less formal conditions could provide deeper understanding. The model proposes one-on-one work to create sustainable improvement to racial equity on institutional levels.

IV. Design Practice

Design as a Process of Discovery

A key foundation to this project was using design to go out in the world and discover new things, not simply offer things out into the world. Using design as knowledge production, not simply solution-proposing led to the foundational structures of how these engagements were designed. In fact, solution proposing was completely eschewed given the context of this thesis and the work was centered on letting go of outcomes and focused on knowledge production.

Development of the strategy proposed in this project begins with fundamental human-centered design research. Design research relies on human connection, empathy building, and narrative tools to gather data through storytelling, experiences, and facilitated insights from users. This data is grounded in human experience and works to uncover deep and non-obvious human needs and desires.

Panthea Lee, a principal and the lead designer at the social impact design firm Reboot²⁸ describes how design research differs from market or academic research saying:

“In design research, the methods and data collected differ from those emphasized in market or academic research. Ethnographic approaches to participant interaction clarifies complex human needs, behaviours, and perspectives. Field immersions unearth contextual and environmental factors that shape user experience.”²⁹

Design research engages with users from the perspective that as subjects, they are the experts.

²⁸ Reboot is a social impact firm dedicated to inclusive development and accountable governance. We help governments, foundations, and international organizations achieve their missions. (<http://reboot.org/about>)

²⁹ Lee, Panthea. "Design Research: What Is It and Why Do It?" *ReBoot: Toward a 21st Century Social Contract*. Reboot, 19 Feb. 2012. Web.

This thesis uses the tools of design research as key components of the design itself. Creating human connection and encouraging storytelling and experiential sharing within the engagement are critical elements of meaningful and productive engagements. The act of eliciting this information is not used to propose new solutions. The act of stimulating knowledge itself is what is being promoted. It is the product that is intended to result from this design.

As stated in the conclusion to the *Guide for Engagement*, the core of what this design presents to the world is using design to advocate knowledge production:

That is everything this process is advocating: to talk to as many people as we can about race, to ask people to reflect on the idea of experiencing privilege, to draw awareness to our possible biases.

The engagement promotes self-directed change, which comes from your own beliefs and experiences. This approach is different from overt political action or formal training. Rather than asking people to change, it provides an opportunity and a space for us to be more aware, and hopefully more intentional in how we interact with and shape our environment. (p. 51)



Fig. 14: Eat, Love, Budapest. Photo courtesy of marijevogelzang.nl/studio

Permission to Act Otherwise

In the design of these engagements I was acutely interested in exploring design's ability to create situations and environments that give people permission to act otherwise—to act differently from what they would consider appropriate and engage in behavior that without the design would not be considered socially acceptable.

There are several examples of designers who create instances to inspire or coerce their audience into behavior modifications that are outside of expected behavior. I was very much inspired by the self-described “eating designer” Marije Vogelzang’s work. She designs beautiful and poignant events, bringing unexpected groups of people together around food and asking them to socially engage with one another in uncharacteristic or even “inappropriate” ways.

One such project was a 3-day performance in Hungary, Budapest: Eat Pray Budapest. Visitors were invited to be hand fed a meal by Roma women while listening to stories and memories of the women's lives. The experience was designed so that the visitor never saw the face or eyes of their feeder and could not identify the individual. Given social stigma around gypsies in Hungary, Vogelzang created the experience specifically for visitors to “feel like there are no social codes or rules he needs to follow.” The experience provoked strong emotional reactions in visitors who would likely never or rarely interact with Roma women outside of this space that allowed them to step outside of what they would consider personally or social acceptable.



Fig. 15: Sharing Dinner. Photo courtesy of marijevogelzang.nl/studio

Another of her designs is the Sharing Dinner. For different corporate clients in Japan, she designed a meal experience in which the tablecloth was suspended from the ceiling, rather than draped over the table. Slits in the cloth allowed participants to place their head and arms “at the table” while their bodies remained outside of the cloth. The food on the table was served on plates to require participants to share and serve one another as they ate. The design created an egalitarian and playful environment, inviting new forms of engagement and interaction with colleagues outside of what is considered acceptable social behavior in the Japanese cultural context.

Race, bias, and privilege are uncomfortable topics, particularly for white people, and generally considered inappropriate to discuss socially. In trying to engage participants in this topic, I approached how to design the space and invite participants specifically in ways that granted permission to step outside of what is expected, “acceptable” behaviors and social norms.

As I describe in the *Guide for Engagement*:

Designating the space is all about granting you and the other conversation participant(s) permission to be able to speak and act differently than what might be considered “normal” or “appropriate.” Using a physical location provides an environmental signal to people to be more open and encourages us to physically commit to having the conversation.

In my work, I used simple signage, tape, and props to communicate what I was doing. I designated two stools at the bar as the “space” for these conversations.

If someone approached me while standing outside, at the pool table, or some other location inside the bar, I asked them to come sit with me at the assigned seats. This

highlighted that we were stepping into a unique interaction and served as an active visual of committing to the conversation.

If you wish to talk to someone about this topic you might choose a specific place to sit and use something simple in the environment to visually designate the area. Even if the space is a physical location you are both familiar with, it can be made visually evident that for this conversation, it is designated for something outside of the ordinary.

Don't make it a spectacle. When I used excessively bright colors or props such as balloons, the interaction became more of an exhibition, than an opportunity for engagement. (p. 26)

Embodied Practice

The work of this thesis proposes design as an embodied practice—what is made tangible through this practice is the embodiment of the way of being in the designed engagements, rather than the creation of a physical artifact or a specific methodology to be followed. I support this proposal by first discussing already existing appreciation in the field of design that recognizes the importance of design as embodied practice. I then use the exploration of an embodied practice to evaluate offerings in the design field that reduce critical components of design into shareable “toolkits,” which emphasize explanations of techniques and frameworks as the designed outputs, rather than the practice itself as design.

Using this project, I evaluate its own translated output, the *Guide for Engagement*, to question if we can create outputs that are able to support rather than supplant embodied design practice.

Design as Embodied Practice

In Herbert Simon’s seminal definition of design he states that design is the “transformation of existing conditions into preferred ones.”³⁰ By prescribing a certain set of principles to guide a way of *being*, we are able to employ ourselves as the objects and use the embodied principles as a tool to move conditions from one state, into a preferred state. The role of design presented in this practices is developing a specific way of being, a certain way of engaging with others, and embodying that practice in such a way that we can transform the existing conditions—states of unawareness—into a preferred way of being—states of becoming aware.

³⁰ Simon, Herbert A. *The Sciences of the Artificial*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969.

Ann Light and Yoko Akama argue in their research and work in design that more important than the methods that are created and used by designers is the way the methods are actually enacted, "it is not meaningful to separate the designer from method since we cannot know participative methods without the person or people enacting them. Methods and techniques require embodiment."³¹ As participatory design practitioners, they emphasize explaining a method is useless without looking at in relation to the practitioner characteristics, "their worldview, purpose and decisions on the day." They note that from experience in the design field this seems obvious, yet we continue to report our findings emphasizing methods (recipes that can be followed) rather than the performative and intangible nature of how one designs with groups.

Interaction designers Woolrych, Hornbæk, Frøkjær, and Cockton make similar arguments using a recipe analogy that when we report our learning, we need to not simply provide recipes for others to follow, but rather detail what actually got cooked and "how it gets cooked."³² In their research and experience they emphasize the importance of not just what are the methods we use in our practice, but how we actually embody these practices, how we work with the methods and how we adapt them to our different contexts.

A celebrated novel, *Like Water for Chocolate* follows with the cooking analogy and illustrates the power of this truth using the literary device of magic realism. The novel's protagonist, Tita, is a brilliant cook. After she passes her descendants use her recipes, but no one is able to recreate the intensely

³¹ Light, Ann, and Yoko Akama. "The Human Touch: Participatory Practice and the Role of Facilitation in Designing with Communities." *Participatory Design Conference*, August 12-16, 2012. Roskilde, Denmark.

³² Woolrych, Alan, Kasper Hornbæk, Erik Frøkjær, and Gilbert Cockton. "Ingredients and Meals Rather Than Recipes: A Proposal for Research That Does Not Treat Usability Evaluation Methods as Indivisible Wholes." *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 27, no. 10 (2011): 940-70.

provocative and sumptuous meals Tita prepared. This is because when Tita cooked, her food was infused with her emotional state at the time. When one ate her food, it had the taste of emotion and also triggered similar emotional states in the eater. The results of her cooking were intimately, inextricably linked with the way in which she embodied the act of preparing the food.

In actuality design is “not the method or the designer but the designer using the method.”³³ This is what I mean by an embodied design practice. There is a thoughtful approach to developing specific methods. There is research and testing, principles and criterion we develop. However, these materials are meaningless if detached from their embodiment.

But Designers Make Things

Designers are traditionally known as practitioners who put something out into the world for people’s use—from chairs to buildings to potato peelers. As we evolve the practice of design to address systems, organizational development, social problems, and behavior change, the “products” we put out into the world become more socially complex and often less tangible in order to address these shifting concerns.

The popularity of “design thinking,” offers design not as an end product, but as a particular way of problem solving in multitude of contexts. And with the rise of design as a mode of thinking, there is an accompanying trend to translate the embodiment of our practice into easily consumable, shareable outputs in forms for others to adopt our practices. From design researchers, to service designers, to organizational designers, to humanitarian designers and design consultants, there is an overwhelming amount of translation of these

³³ Light, Ann, and Yoko Akama. "The Human Touch: Participatory Practice and the Role of Facilitation in Designing with Communities." *Participatory Design Conference*, August 12-16, 2012. Roskilde, Denmark.

service offerings into explanatory “methods” in both an attempt to legitimize and share practices.

An example of what I am highlighting is illustrated through the website, ServiceDesignToolkit.org.³⁴ The site was created by three design groups, the digital design firm Namhan, the service design firm Design Flanders, and the European public service design hub SPIDER. The site offers a service design toolkit, including a information on how to run workshop with accompanying frameworks and materials, posters used to explain the service design process, a manual to explain service design step-by-step and technique cards to explain in detail “techniques” to run a service-design project. The offering is visually well-designed, comprehensive, extremely accessible, and free. At the bottom of the page, is the statement, “With this toolkit you will be able to do most by yourself. However, it is recommended to hire an external consultant to moderate the workshops and to guide you through the process.” (Sic.)

While there are arguably benefits to being able to translate your services into widely shareable outputs, it is important for us to question what it means to turn an experienced, embodied practice into simplified outputs and then encourage our audience to employ them on their own.

The very nature of good design would dictate if we are going to make forms of communication, we try to make the outputs as understandable and usable as possible. This “plug-and-play” model questions design’s ability to embody a mature service offering. It undermines the importance of an embodied practice of a designer and leads to shallow service offerings under a diluted umbrella of “design practice” that one can “do most[ly] by yourself.”

³⁴ ServiceDesignToolkit.org. *Service Design Toolkit*. Namahn, Design Flanders, SPIDER, 2014.

A therapist never thinks about how they should translate their practice into a toolkit for someone else to be able to “do most [of it] by yourself.” The embodied practice is of the utmost importance and it would be considered ludicrous for them to think that through a distillation of methods, a person could be able to practice therapy for themselves. A similar level of rigor should be applied to the intangible aspects of what it means to be able to embody a design practice and facilitate design services. As design offers problem-solving services, we must let go of the need to boil those services down into simple, translatable and shareable tools and methods. We must acknowledge the intangible as a crucial part of what it is that design brings as its service, the embodied practice of the designer.

The inclination for us to translate an embodied service into methods and easily adoptable outputs is a vestige of historical design practices that are attached to producing tangible forms of communication and objects. If this practice is to be a defining piece of design, we must push the practice to evolve what form these translations take on and how we distribute the information. It is critical to be able to talk about and translate your practice, regardless of its tangibility, and *the ways and with whom* we choose to share our knowledge are important considerations.

Guide for Engagement

The context of this thesis falls into the “socially complex” category of design offerings. It is a hypersensitive social issue, mired in deeply entrenched power dynamics. Engagements around these topics can be extremely volatile based on unpredictable personal histories and experiences. Given these conditions, I want to underscore that what design offers through this work is an embodied product, the engagement itself.

Given my above beliefs about the state of design, I grappled with how to create the accompanying *Guide for Engagement*. It was a difficult and sensitive process to undertake, balancing the need to share the practice and avoid oversimplifying it into a “recipe.” As Light and Akama encourage, the guide is an attempt to marry the method with the act of embodying the method in a way that both encourages engagement and illustrates the complexity of it. It would be irresponsible to promote design in this space as being able to introduce a set of methods that are explained like recipes to be followed, absent of attempting to grapple with the embodied practice.

In my attempt to share the work I had developed, it was important that the guide emphasize that it is through engagement with others in meaningful conversation that we are able to build awareness. This can be done in many ways, and the process proposed here offers ways of being that can support that practice.

In the introduction, the importance of Direct Experience is underscored. It states that the proposed process, “*suggests an approach to build racial equity through in-person engagement and personal reflection rather than academic understanding or political action.*” (p. 14)

Reviewing the guidebook is a means to guide you towards direct, in-person engagement. The emphasis here is that you deepen understanding and build awareness through the act of engagement, not through using “the methods.”

The instructions throughout the *Guide for Engagement* place extra emphasis on *ways of being* rather than implementation of specific strategies. Engagement is described as “*the heart of this work. The Engage step is focused on process and highlights the importance of being **bold, open, flexible** and not attached to an outcome.*” (p. 30) The steps that follow include allowing yourself to be vulnerable and highlighting the importance of making similarities and differences explicit. I use examples from my experience to describe ways in which I learned or enacted this, but ultimately there is not a specific method to follow that allows one to simply embody these principles.

The *Guide for Engagement* emphasizes the importance of not accepting the proposed process as such at several points throughout. In the introduction on page 15, it describes:

If this were a cookbook, the information presented here would be encouragement to start baking and instructions on how to approach it. It would not be a recipe to follow. Following these instructions does not guarantee a specific outcome. In fact, I encourage you not to be attached to predetermined outcomes with these engagements.

Rather, this process is asking us to engage more, think about how we engage, and incorporate our own learnings and experiences to make the process our own. It does not ask us to change people or reach a certain end point.
(p. 15)

It speaks specifically to how to embody the practice, rather than how to manage the tools.

As we begin to discuss how to engage, I want to call attention to the fact that no matter how you set it up, this process does not create a managed situation. As stated at the beginning, we are here to engage with people in informal spaces, who may not be as open to, informed about, or passionate about these issues. Participants may have different views, goals, and experiences they are bringing to the engagement.

Rather than attempting to eliminate or lessen uncertainties, this process encourages us to embrace them.

Such high levels of uncertainty require a certain amount of daring and flexibility throughout the experience. The Engage strategies are designed to support being more bold and vulnerable than we typically are. Here, we leverage uncertainty, using it to facilitate new understanding, and to realize the opportunity available in a conversation that could go in infinite directions. (p. 15)

What I am attempting to explore here are ways of talking about principles that move us beyond translating our work into toolkits, but at the same time using translation to support embodied practice. This means we must move beyond reporting on specific methodologies or distilling information into a format of simplified techniques and tricks.

The practice ultimately proposed by this work is the idea that the design is not a recipe of methods or a tangible product in the world, but perhaps can offer a way of being in the world. This in essence is asking the designers not to simply make things and put them into the world for others to use, but to embody our work. To create change in our systems and structures through embodying the design we are putting out into the world.

Appendices

A. Prototypes

What Do You See?

I was inspired by several design projects that through their work granted people permission to behave outside of normal social constraints. In order to explore how to ask people to open up in unusual contexts and explore human connections, we set up a designed situation in a public square in downtown New York.³⁵ The event, *What Do You See*, invited participants to interview a stranger passing by and then predict their future.

Once seated a facilitator explained the activity. The two people had to spend the first 15 seconds without talking and simply looking at one another. The Imaginer then asked the Subject, three questions. It was the Imaginer's job to predict the future of the Subject after the interview, using guided questions. The Subject became the next Imaginer as a new participant joined.

Simple elements such as colorful seating, tape and signage created visual cues and separated the event from the rest of the public square. The simple set-up drew a lot of interest from people passing by and the willingness to participate and excitement people expressed surprised us.

There were varying levels of engagement, from lightly engaged and surface level, to deeply serious about wanting to connect and understand. From approximately 18 participants, most were concerned about being able to create meaningful predictions for their subjects. Given that they knew they were going to have to predict the future of the person across from them, participants were interested in knowing personal details about the individual. Many of the questions asked were "inappropriately" probing and something you would not generally ask a complete stranger. However, given the short period of time, the actual engagements were shallow and led to fairly direct and straightforward understanding of the person.

What was important about this exercise was the willingness of people to engage with relatively little prompting, the openness people expressed in

³⁵ This project was done in collaboration with two colleagues, Stephanie Lukito and Cameron Hanson for the national event, Dare to Imagine.

their interviews, and the need for more time and less structure to create encounters that are more meaningful.



Fig. 16: Setting up the space



Fig. 17: Participants at the event

Prototype: Understanding the Subconscious and Feelings of Belonging

Much of our bias lives in our subconscious and directs our beliefs and behaviors in ways that create distance from people. As noted above in the research on implicit bias, we are hardwired to create categorizations and put people in boxes. We are also evolutionarily inclined to avoid things that are different from us or unfamiliar. While this may have at one time served us well as a safety strategy, it now dictates behaviors that cause social disconnection.³⁶

I designed a workshop to explore how we could bring out from our subconscious feelings of belonging and connection in order to combat the social categorization and disconnection we create. By building understanding of what people associate with belonging and connection, I could work the results into my design.

The workshop began with comfortable seats, relaxing music and homemade baked goods for everyone to feel welcomed and comfortable. Participants were asked to not speak to one another for the duration of the workshop and stay focused on their own experiences. The group was led through a guided imagery that asked them to explore where in their lives they felt connection, support, and belonging. They were asked to imagine a physical location in great detail and place people from their lives in the space. They were then asked to concentrate on the feeling that was being created—where in their body did they feel it, if it had a color, and what shape it took on. Then they were introduced to a table full of supplies and asked to make a physical manifestation of the belonging they felt.

Participants experienced an overwhelming sense of calm and relaxation. They felt extreme support and love coming out of the workshop. The work revealed how incredibly strong feelings of belonging are and how they can be manifested in our own mind, without the actual external factors or stimulus creating it. It was also a demonstration of how to make things that we know implicitly, about love, support and belonging, explicit by asking people to visualize, describe with feelings and associate them with specific shapes, and colors.

³⁶ Banaji, Mahzarin R., and Anthony G. Greenwald. *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. New York: Delacorte, 2013. Print.



Fig. 18: Workshop participant building a physical model of belonging



Fig. 19: Workshop participant showing finished model

C. Suggested Questions

What has been your **experience** of race in the United States?

How do you **feel** talking about race? How do you **feel** talking about racial issues? Where do you think these feelings come from?

What is your **cultural background**/where are you from? How does this background affect the way you experience race? How does it affect your communication style?

Tell a story about a time in your life you were **different from the people around you**. What happened? How did it feel? How has this incident influenced your choices since?

What **values** do you hold about how to treat other people? How do you make those **values** visible through action?

What are some **groups** you belong to? What do these **group identities** say about you?

Racism and white supremacy are embedded in institutional structures of society, not seeing it is no great service, because it will reproduce itself unless it's disrupted. We can really disrupt race fundamentally, where you can no longer predict access to power and wealth and privilege and meaning, based on race...and that future is possible, but only if we're willing to first notice it."

-john a. powell

