PAPER

Participatory Antiracist Design: Confronting Colorblind Racism in Predominantly White Spaces

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Popular cafés are often sites of racial contention and controversy. While notorious examples of racism at the Ink! Cafe in Denver and the Starbucks in Philadelphia gained national attention in 2017 and 2018, there are countless racist interactions at similar cafés around the country that occur daily. Ranging from microaggressions to surveillance to physical and emotional harm, expressions of racism are violent and overwhelming to some, but remain invisible for many others. A collective of owners of a prominent independent café--and longstanding local institution--partnered with the authors of this paper on a community engagement grant to conduct a participatory antiracist community design exercise. In this paper, the authors present the research design of this project as a case study of a methodological framework for confronting racism in predominantly white social institutions such as cafés. Building on sociological framings of white institutions and colorblind racism, this paper reports on the application of these theories and methods in participatory design. The authors present a two-part methodology that includes methods of collaboration and methods of community engagement, in tandem, as means toward engaging the political stakes of antiracist work. This methodology builds on the lineage of slow, intentional, and redistributive community engagement work. The authors argue that successful engagement with contentious political issues, like racism, requires politicized methods of collaboration. Given the prevalence of colorblind racist ideologies, the predominantly white and affluent community demographic of this case test the limitations and potentials of antiracist design methods in participatory design work. The paper contributes a timely case study of community-engaged design as well as a methodological framework for antiracist design justice that can inform design and institutional change in everyday community institutions where colorblind racism remains a powerful force.

INTRODUCTION

Racism presents itself in a number of guises. From overt acts of individual animus to institutionalized barriers to achieving equity, many of us participate in systems and behaviors of racism.[1] One form of racism in particular--colorblind racism--occurs when someone considers themselves not to be racist, but holds (and acts upon) racist ideologies. A white person may claim they are not racist, cite as evidence that they have Black friends, but hold mixed feelings about inter-racial marriage.[2] Despite claims that they "don't see color," they perpetuate racialized and racist views on a wide range of topics such as relationships, college admissions, housing, and community.

In predominantly white communities (PWCs), the low numbers of persons of color exacerbates the impacts that colorblind racist expressions carry. A colorblind racist ideology might find expression as a microaggression in everyday interactions, wherein, for example, a white person will ask a Latinx person where she's from. In a PWC, this question reflects the racist connotation that the person of color does not belong. Such colorblind microaggressions are frequently reported to be so commonplace as to accumulate as significant traumas for persons of color.[3] They occur in everyday spaces and in everyday conversations: at the grocery store, in the restaurant, at school, the workplace, and at the popular local café.

In this paper, we present our methodology for a participatory research project that aims to bring attention to the ways everyday spaces such as these reflect colorblind racist ideologies. Implied is an argument that everyday spaces in PWC's serve as exclusionary white spaces, not just through the interactions that take place in those spaces, but also expressed through the design of those spaces.[4] How, then, might we engage such spaces, their users, and those that manage and operate them, in order to build awareness about the racism inherent in them? What methods can we mobilize, as designers, to inspire change, spatially and socially?

In answering these questions, we build on scholarship that examines the racialization of space. We bring together literature in anthropology, architecture, geography, and sociology. Notably, we see this body of work as distinct from scholarship

on racist interactions that take place *within* space. Though both considerations are part of our study, we find that the former is often obscured by the latter. The writings about the racialization of space (itself) suggest that there is a racism inherent in ways spaces are configured, their material aspects, and their design.[5] As illustrations of this thread of scholarship, consider black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick's arguments about how architecture, space, and geography shape blackness and whiteness through histories of traumatic oppression as well as radical liberation.[6] Her powerful analyses of the slave auction block, slave quarters, and even the geometry of the attic that one escaping enslavement uses as a hide-away, bring such material considerations as tectonics, material, and geometry into narratives of racialization and white supremacy. In another illustration of this strand of scholarship, architectural theorist Craig Wilkins deconstructs philosophical conceptions of space and ownership to criticise white assumptions about spatial dominance.[7] His illustration of conflict between a white and a Black person waiting in line to use an ATM machine highlights the racialization of circulation in even the most basic spatial configurations. Other influences include art historian Adrienne Brown's analysis of the racialization of city-dwellers' imagination through popular discourses about progress, racial mixing, and racial fetishization in the context of the proliferation of skyscrapers in the early 1900s.[8] And as a final example here, geographer Rashad Shabbaz extends the racialized logic of incarceration facilities to the Black communities that become de facto extensions of those facilities.[9] What the work of these scholars shares is an attention to the role that space plays in the formation of racism and whiteness.

One notable characteristic of these examples is their concern with architectural scales of space. There is a rich and expansive tradition of scholarship on the racialization of urban scales of space. Studies of red-lining, the racialization of neighborhoods, and other forms of urban segregation lend important insights about the operations of race and space.[10] What that scholarship does not account for, however, is the ways that racism can operate differently at the more human scales of buildings and interiors. For the purpose of our study, where we are engaging community members in an interrogation of the racialization of space in a local, independent café/bookstore, we have needed to rely on those theorizations of race and space that attend to the architectural scale.

Indeed, cafés are productive spaces for the study of race and space. They function as both private and public spaces. They function as social hubs. And in some cases, they can function as anchoring community institutions. In the café that we were seated in at the time of drafting this paper, there were unhoused regulars for whom the café is a space of socialization, work, and shelter. Of the sixteen people in the space, nine have been early morning regulars for decades. The café serves as a space of community continuity, family gathering, and the founding and development of significant bonds of friendship and solidarity.

Four other patrons appeared to be college students or otherwise professionally occupied with work. They too find community, or at the least, a space to work privately in the company of others.

As spaces that house this diversity of uses and interactions, cafés are also sites of contention and friction (e.g. Figure 1). The racist confrontation on April 12, 2018 at the Starbucks in Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia is one of countless examples of racism that plague the café industry.[11] In the same café that we frequented while drafting this paper, we witnessed a group of elementary school-age Latinx youth, with their teacher, being asked to purchase something or to leave--whereas we've seen groups of white patrons who have been present without purchasing drinks for longer periods of time, without being confronted. We've noticed the tenor of baristas' conversational tones change between white and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and persons of color) customers in line, and we've heard stories from underrepresented minority patrons about feeling unwelcome in that space. They cite things people say, ways people look at them, as well as non-human aspects of the café experience, such as the drink menus, imagery, and symbolism in decorational art works.

As spaces of quasi-private, quasi-public gathering, socialization, and community, cafés merit attention as a particular type of space, or typology. Given the fraught history of cafés as spaces of racial frictions, the design of cafés stands to bear unique insights into antiracist design.[12] Indeed, an underlying aim of this ongoing study is to bring attention to spaces like cafés in architectural research on social problems.

In the wake of the racial justice uprisings of the summer of 2020, the employee-owners of a prominent locally-owned café/bookstore, which we'll call "the Mountain" or MBC (for Mountain Booksellers and Café) in Colorado's Front Range region, reached out to the lead author (who is a regular patron) about collaborating on exploring ideas about redesigning their space. Their goal was to explore ways racial justice work could be extended to the space of the café/bookstore. The initial conversation began with ideas for more equitably displaying the work of Black and BIPOC authors by considering the hierarchy of visibility of books. The most highly visible books sat in the window display, next were books laid flat on tables of featured books, then were books in bookshelves with their fronts facing out, and last were books with only their spines visible. This conversation expanded to include other forms of symbolism and signage throughout the space. Ideas about circulation, visibility, privacy, and spatial hierarchy soon followed. Ultimately, we decided that staff and patrons should be part of the conversations. Thus, we conceptualized a participatory design process that would play a role in shaping conversation and awareness around racism, racist interactions, and the whiteness of spaces like MBC. In this paper, we report on the methodological innovations that serve as the foundation for our ongoing research project with MBC.

Figure 1. Cafes as sites of overt racial contention. Ink! Cafe, Denver. Photograph by Lindsey Bartlett for The Denver Post.

Together with three members of the MBC employee-owner team, we received a university-community outreach grant. The two-year project is supporting our ongoing participatory antiracist design exercise. The project includes conversations, interviews, drawing, and walk-throughs with patrons, employee-owners, as well as members of the broader community who do not patronize MBC. (The project methods are detailed below.) Data collected using these methods will be gathered and processed through the course of 2022-3, using qualitative content analysis as part of grounded theory building. Findings will be presented through architectural renderings and collage for display at MBC and possible exhibit at a local public library. The broader goals of the project have been developed collaboratively with MBC employee-owners. They include: (a) facilitating conversation about racism in PWCs, (b) collectively building an understanding of ways the design of MBC is connected to experiences of racism, and (c) contributing lessons learned from this exercise to the café industry through publishing our experience in trade magazines (such as *Barista Magazine*).

This goal of this paper is to present the framework for the MBC project as a methodological case study of participatory antiracist design praxis.[13] We contextualize the project in understandings of whiteness and racism in everyday community institutions. We present an extended discussion of our method, in this context, to offer a contribution to participatory design methods.

METHODS

There are two aspects of this project's methods that are germane to the antiracist approach: the first are the methods of engaging the broader community, which include interviews, walk throughs, and an interactive design exercise. We call these our *methods of community engagement*. The second set are the methods of engaging direct collaborators in defining and conducting this project, which include unstructured conversation, collective authorship, and trust building. We call these our *methods of collaboration*. We argue that both methods, in tandem, are required for more sustained engagements that challenge whiteness and racism. As we outline below, this approach is inspired by political action theory--with its emphasis on collective engagement toward addressing social problems--where we combine community engagement and collaboration as a means to address contentious political issues together with our collaborators.[14] In doing so, we share reflections on a more intensive prioritization of the concerns and the politics of project participants than typically occurs in community engaged design research.

Methods of Collaboration. Our methods of collaboration are inspired by research in social movement and political organizing work by BIPOC writers and organizers.[15] The literature presents such priorities as: enabling organic processes, prioritizing relationships, having patience, working toward consensus, addressing power and status, including "the head and the heart," being authentic, and ensuring projects are place-based.[16] Specifically, we prioritized working at the speed of trust, collective conversations on positionality, privilege, vulnerability, and collective authorship. Each of these three approaches require investments of time and emotion.

Similar to deep ethnographic fieldwork, this project necessitated regular and long-standing presence with the community of collaborators. This was achieved through informal and unstructured conversations and regular patronage of the MBC. The lead author has spent several years patronizing the MBC and, since the inception of this project, has spent a few dozen hours in conversation with members of the ownership and staff.

The PWC context of the project lends itself to complex, unresolved, and emotionally intensive conversations on whiteness, privilege, engagement, allyship, and bystander politics. These conversations drew solidarity, disagreement, frustration, and confusion. These range of emotions served to strengthen commitment to engagement in the project for some, while leading to frustration in others. Our methods of collaboration began with co-authorship of grant applications, project objectives, and forthcoming trade publications, but quickly expanded to embrace the contentious and messy politics of collective movement building. Indeed, we argue that successful engagement with contentious political issues, like racism, requires politicized methods of collaboration.

Furthermore, we contend that this method of collaboration more effectively enables institutional change. Through collectively struggling--as collaborators, with a common, if often dynamic, set of aims--we observe that participants in this partnership grow invested in the work. For community institutions like MBC, we imagine that this investment is more likely to translate to changes in business management, staff hiring, public programming, marketing, and the other aspects of operating the space (including maintenance of a business and a community). With the design and architecture of MBC tied to these aspects of the institution, we believe that more profound antiracist work can be done. By contrast, the effects of a brief community charrette and the implementation of basic design concepts might ultimately fade into memory without lasting institutional change.

Methods of community engagement. The second aspect of our approach is our methods of community engagement. Our primary methods of getting community input are interviews, walk-throughs, and interactive pamphlets that participants fill out with sketches and annotations. First, the interviews are

Figure 2 Interactive pamphlets for participant annotation and sketching. Photograph by authors.

unstructured around the topic of race and space and located in the context of what we frame as a collective exploration of ways MBC might become a more antiracist space. Unstructured interviews place participants in the driver's seat, with the interviewer playing a supporting role through listening, probing further on points of interest, and even brainstorming ideas with participants in the lead.[17] For this project on forms of racism in white spaces, unstructured interviews are intended to aid in working through aspects of whilte guilt and fragility, while providing a safe and brave space for participants to explore conceptions and emotions tied to race and racism. Second, the walk-throughs offer participants the opportunity to think and talk through ways the space of MBC might reflect and perpetuate institutionalized racism. The walk-throughs also adhere to the spirit of unstructured interviews, in privileging the narratives and tensions that participants want to explore. And third, the interactive pamphlet (see Figure 2) provides participants with prompts and drawings of the MBC space that they draw on and write over. These are 11x17 sheets folded into small booklets with instructions, drawings, and ample space for sketching and writing in thoughts. These offer users an anonymous form of engagement, on participants' own time, and employ an alternative form of expression.

We recruit participants through the interactive pamphlets, primarily. These pamphlets are located in prominent locations at MBC, including the bar, where drinks are ordered and purchased

and at the register of the book store area. To capture perspectives of people who do not patronize the MBC, we also place pamphlets at significant community spaces nearby, including the public library branches, City recreational facilities, community arts centers, and community centers of affordable housing projects. Our intention is to distribute the location of interactive pamphlets wide enough to reach people who frequent MBC, those who visit occasionally, those who have visited the MBC but no longer do because they feel excluded, and those who might not patronize MBC for other reasons that may be related to racialized experiences of space.

The pamphlets are designed to reflect the visual styles of content within MBC. We studied the signage, fonts, and aesthetic choices employed throughout MBC and replicated or improvised on them. We built a digital model of MBC and rendered a plan-oblique and elevation views. The elevations offered vignettes of prominent spaces within MBC. These renderings are presented as a gradient from vector graphic to line-drawing to blank space to encourage participants to complete and modify the drawings as part of the participatory design process (see Figure 3). The design of the pamphlet was done in collaboration with MBC staff owners. We discussed textual and visual content over several months with revisions recorded on a collaborative GoogleDoc. Four iterations of the pamphlet were produced and circulated among collaborators for revisions. The finalized pamphlets are made available, as noted above, in several locations for patrons to take copies to complete on their own time. Completed pamphlets are submitted to MBC staff to redeem a complimentary drink from the café.

Three forms of data are collected from our methods of community engagement: notes from interviews, notes and sketches from walk-throughs, and completed interactive pamphlets. Interview and walk-through notes are being hand-written during conversations with reflections recorded afterwards.[18] Identifying information is not collected from participants. The pamphlet data includes written notes and sketches by participants. We will be using qualitative content analysis (QCA) to code and categorize text and graphic content. We intend to develop our coding procedure iteratively and inductively. Following standard processes of grounded theory formation, we will group emergent codes into categories and work toward identifying central themes which are grounded in the literature that we reviewed (and summarized in the introduction above).[19]

IMPLICATIONS

Engaging a predominantly white community in a participatory design exercise that directly tackles racism and space is a revealing and fraught endeavor. In developing our methodological framework, we encountered a complex range of emotions spanning enthusiastic allyship with deep commitment to racial justice to fragility, denial, and frustration. Engaging participants that span the range of patrons (and non-patrons) of the MBC: we have been receiving input from unhoused members of
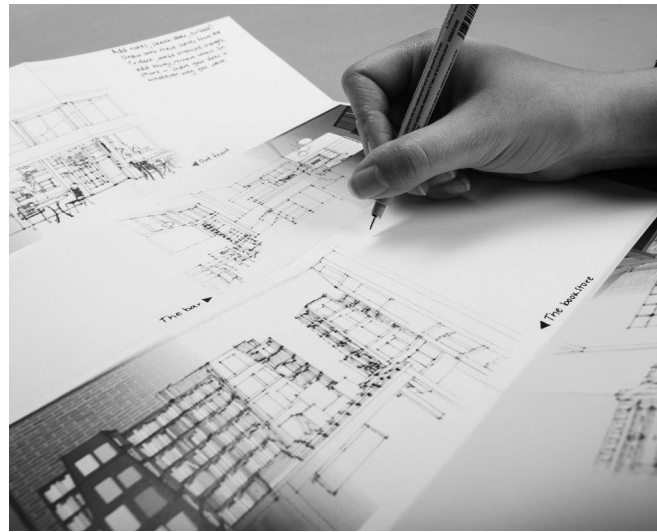

Figure 3. Interior perspective renderings used for participants to sketch on. Photograph by authors.

the community to members with generations of accumulated wealth; we have been hearing from underrepresented minority members and the predominant white majority; and we have been hearing from casual patrons in their twenties and "old timer" octogenarians whose patronage of the MBC has been a daily ritual for decades. The interviews, walk throughs, and interactive pamphlets are being met with a range of gratitude to enthusiastic hope to agitated disapproval. We strive not only to navigate these challenges, but to embrace them.

The two dimensions of the project methodology--our *methods of collaboration* and our *methods of community engagement*--reflect what we perceive to be a methodological contribution of this project. We argue in this paper that to conduct participatory design around contentious social issues, we benefit from acknowledging and embracing the politics of the project. In the case of participatory antiracist design thinking, this requires engaging contentious politics through a collective investigation of racism and whiteness. We also argue that intentional, patient, and reflexive methods of collaboration are poised to facilitate more entrenched institutional change. Inasmuch as we acknowledge architecture in its institutional context, we find this longer-term strategy of institutional change to be central to antiracist work. The methods of community engagement that we are employing in this project reflect standard approaches in ethnographic fieldwork. We advocate for deep and long-standing participant observation that requires participation in the culture of the space in ways that probably cannot be achieved in short, targeted studies.

When completed, we see this project contributing to MBC and, by extension, the larger independent café industry. We hope the conversations and participatory methods might play a role

in bringing more critical awareness to whiteness and racism in the community in which the MBC serves as a social institution. Finally, we intend for the project methods to contribute to the literature that connects participatory design and antiracism work. In doing so, we hope to have shared a productive case for future participatory design work that engages whiteness and racism, particularly in predominantly white communities.

ENDNOTES

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16. These principles inspired by the work of Franklin Sage (e.g. "Indigenous Knowledge System and Decolonizing Methodology Interwoven into Higher Education Experiences: Autoethnography," ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (2017)) as collected and arranged by Chandler, Patrick and Emanuelle Vital, "Guidelines for Art and Science Partnerships," University of Colorado Boulder (unpublished, 2021).

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