

**Wrestling with Systemic Edges**  
**Designing for Long-term Social Change**

By

Sultan Sharrief

B.A. Film & Video Studies, University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 2006

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Signature redacted

Signature of Author: \_\_\_\_\_

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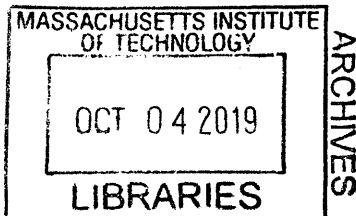
Certified by: \_\_\_\_\_

Cesar McDowell  
Professor of Practice of Civic Design  
Thesis Supervisor

Signature redacted

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_

Vivek Bald  
Associate Professor of Writing and Digital Media  
Director of Graduate Studies, Comparative Media Studies





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\* Figure 17 is missing from p.51

# **Wrestling with Systemic Edges Designing for Long-term Social Change**

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Sultan Sharrief

Submitted to the program in Comparative Media Studies/Writing  
on August 2, 2019 in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science in Comparative Media Studies

## **Abstract**

In this work I seek to show how the lack of nuance in data representation and media practices of the American educational system impedes the design of effective educational interventions for low-income Black youth. First, I argue that data on educational attainment misrepresents race and class thereby masking the educational reality of low-income Black youth. “Data realities” and “Black Hole Data” emerge as hidden phenomena. Next, I analyze a successful transmedia civic initiative, the Ice Bucket Challenge, to illustrate how new media structures and technologies are being used to create new opportunities for social impact. I will then communicate the design process called HIIPE, as well as the work titled *Black (w)Hole SC-i52* (Street Cred’ iteration 52) that I produced using this process. The goal of this body of work and design approach is to create a new communication system using virtual reality that more clearly articulates the impacts of race and class on educational attainment for low-income Black youth.

Thesis Supervisor:  
Ceasar McDowell  
Professor of Practice of Civic Design

## Acknowledgments

In the name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful  
As Shadu Ilaha Illallah was As Shadu ana Muhamadan Rasulalah  
(I bear witness there is no G-D but the Most High and that Muhammad is his Messenger

This work has been the product of the support of an amazing community of mentors, friends, and family at MIT and beyond. I would like to thank my thesis advisors Ceasar McDowell and Sasha Costanza-Chock. Their leadership and guidance has been priceless and nothing short of life saving as I navigated the academic space. I also have to thank the Comparative Media Studies department, Edward Schiappa, Heather Hendershot, Shannon Larkin, Andrew Whitacre, and all the others who put up with my constant rule breaking, mess-making, and general disruptive behavior during my time at MIT.

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## **Tadthakir Reflection Interlude for Introduction**

In the Sunni Muslim tradition I state that anything of truth, of goodness, of honor, of love that is said here is from The Most High and anything that is wrongly guided or false, or of lowly stature is from me. I ask for forgiveness in advance.

In Plato's *Apology*<sup>1</sup> Socrates advocates that the (hu)man who knows anything knows that (she/they) he knows nothing at all. I hope that I know a little something or at least enough to know that I know nothing. I confess.

### **Fall 2017**

I had just wrapped up a life of social impact and arts advocacy hustling between Detroit and Ann Arbor, shot a documentary in Korea for ten days with a Mormon POW from Mesa Arizona, then packed up my value-depreciated hybrid and hit the road. One of my first encounters at MIT was unpleasant and felt possibly racially charged. I arrived on a Sunday after a 16-hour solo drive from Detroit. I checked into graduate housing and parked right out front at a meter. On Monday morning I woke up early to put money in the meter of my parking space. I run out in pajamas with a stack of quarters. I nod at the desk attendant (who I notice is kind of cute) and run out to my car. On my way back in, I catch the door to head back to my floor. The desk attendant yells for me to stop and ask where I'm going. I tell him to my room (after a look down at my "wife-beater" undershirt and pajama shorts and a look at him that says, *where does it look like I'm going?*). He says I need an ID card to check in. I don't have an ID. I arrived the night before (a Sunday) and the ID Atlas office does not open until Monday. But I have my room key, which I hold up. He gives me a disappointed look and waves me through. I walk away and frown and think to myself, *it's move-in weekend, kids from all over the world are moving in with help from their parents and friends and you stop me in my pajamas?* I let it go. Everything isn't a racial thing. Though he doesn't seem so cute anymore.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Internet Classics Archive | Apology by Plato." Section 2

Upon arrival, I was also fairly broke, but I had done the FAFSA<sup>2</sup> and a few rounds of administrative forms so I figured I should be getting a payment in early August or so. Part of my aid package was for moving expenses and we had to check into graduate housing around August 26<sup>th</sup>. On September 5th I email the MIT Financial Aid office with an aid request. The reply feels cold and impersonal. “Digital Artifact” [DA#1] <sup>3</sup>

Figure 1

Hmmm, that’s weird, *Can you say “Hi”*--but okay.

After three email exchanges, I go into the office on 9/18. This is the second week of class and my bank account is running really low. In the office, they tell me we are paid our financial aid with our first paycheck as a Research Assistant (RA). It comes at the end of September. The financial aid reimbursement should post a week later. Around October 8<sup>th</sup>. (In all of the emails with the representative, she never mentioned this before).

But this is MIT? I text my sister to get a loan to cover my costs of living. [DA#2 9/17]<sup>4</sup>

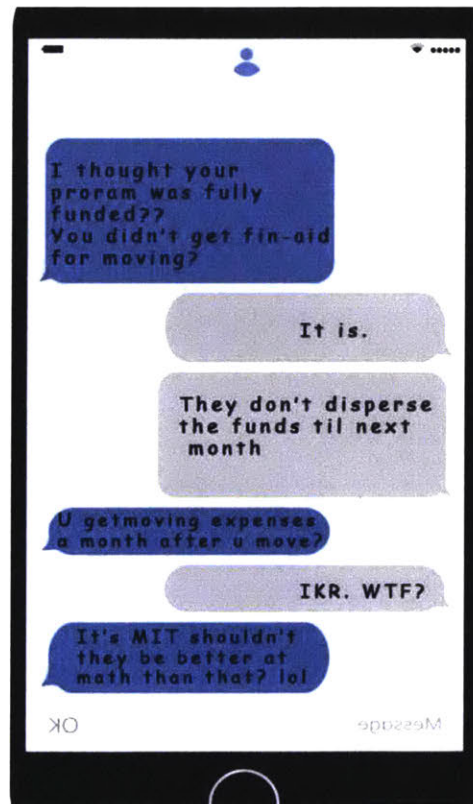


Figure 2

<sup>2</sup>Free Application for Federal Student Aid “FAFSA®.”

<sup>3</sup> Digital Artifact # 1 Email from MIT Financial Aid Office to Sultan Sharrief. September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Digital Artifact # 4. Simulated sms text message with Sister.

**[W#1] March 2019<sup>5</sup>**

After a series of disruptions, I learn from the head of ICEO that the reason for this process is for the Institute to mitigate financial risk. You have to be a full time student to receive aid. Registration doesn't officially end until late September. If they gave AID in August, the student might not register for full term or at all. Because financial aid is Federal, and not from the institution, they wait until after all of your classes have been processed and reports go to the Federal offices. Then the Feds send funds back and they have to clear MIT's bank before reaching students. Discomfort of a few students is not worth the financial liability. [5\)](#)

I entered the fall research period with 3 overall takeaways from this reflection.

- 1) Be mindful of ways the institution's practical policies might differ from the values stated on paper.
- 2) Another side of MIT's popular motto of "meritocracy" is that people who are unfamiliar or at the margins of the norm may get left behind.
- 3) I wanted to see the truth of my past experiences and current identity reflected in the conversations and policies around me.

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<sup>5</sup> Wormhole # 1. For instructions on Wormholes see Introduction section 1.



## Introduction

Digital Artifact 3 [DA#3]. Submitted as an outline of my proposed Thesis.<sup>6</sup>

...Luckily, this feat of laziness was done the day they shut off the water. With enough imagination one could convince oneself that it was a type of oatmeal scented body wash that actually left you feeling somewhat clean. Two teenage boys washing up using that one pot of water for six days required the swallowing of a massive amount of pride, but it was nothing compared to the hunger. The pangs of one's stomach were like a constant reminder of a pitiful existence. It stayed with you throughout the day, just in case you ever forgot your place in society. It knocked on the walk to the bus stop, churned during homeroom, precariously permitted respite during lunch, reminded you that you were worthless in gym, then returned with a vengeance in the evening. My thesis question started on one of those evenings.

That vengeful hunger rattled against my ribs while my brother and I, fifteen and thirteen respectively, watched back-to-back episodes of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. Our father drove taxis in another state so we were effectively living by ourselves in a rundown ranch home still sporting a shag carpet with two decades of dirt. In the episode, Rachel or Monica had lost their job at a diner and were complaining about being broke. Yet the whole episode they joked, laughed, and lounged around what looked to me like a luxurious penthouse apartment. Their broke didn't look like my broke. And even though

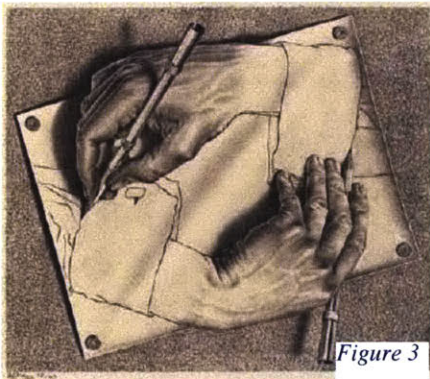
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<sup>6</sup> This is a portion of a paper submitted in Spring 2018. It is an original work by the author.

*Biggie Smalls* and others talked constantly about the “hood” in New York, there didn’t seem to be anyone that looked like me in their city. There was not room for my “broke” in their “broke.” My broke left most of us broken.

As we did our best to live vicariously through *Friends*, and later *Seinfeld*, I asked a question that many lower income Black youth ask on a daily basis: “Why is this happening to me?” Then I remembered that my Biology teacher told us not to ask “Why?” but to ask “How is it that..?” because sometimes the answer to “Why?” could just be “Because that’s just the way it is” or “Because I said so”. However, if you keep asking “How is it that..?” each new piece of information leads to a new query and set of answers. So a hungry thirteen year old asked, “How is it that, after all the civil rights stuff, and *We Shall Overcome*, and United Negro College Funds, and Jesse Jackson campaigns, and Tupac songs, we are still broke and broken?” Since then, every major educational or career decision I’ve made has been based on continuing that line of questioning. Now, twenty-one years later, I think I may have found an answer.

## Methodology



<sup>7</sup> As a transmedia activist and an avid practitioner of Marshall McLuhan’s philosophy that the “Medium is the Message,” I believe it is imperative to communicate multifaceted narratives using various media mechanics to honor the essence and cultural heritage of any story. This document is conveyed with the very research and design methodology (HIPE) it seeks to articulate. HIPE

is Holistic, Intuitive, Iterative Project Evolution. HIPE is an autoethnographical approach to communicating. It takes Participatory Action Research (PAR) and fuses it with civic design strategies to create a wholly organic medium of communication. **W(X)**<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Drawing Hands* M.C Escher Prints, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 1974

<sup>8</sup> W(X) represents a future Wormhole. It represents a reference that has impacted an idea but needs further exploration.

Therefore, my thesis is conveyed (as opposed to written) using HIPE. It uses cinematic script structure, short stories, data visualizations, prose, poetry, diagrams, virtual reality, and performance. HIPE seeks to both resist deep-seeded structural elements of media practice that may be rooted in histories of oppression, while simultaneously realizing alternative structures through an organic redirection of energy and focus. “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*).”<sup>9</sup> This approach combines autobiography and ethnography so HIPE is both process and product.

I approach this acknowledging my identity as a low-income, Black- American, Queer Muslim. From this position of “otherness” I seek to “study” and document my cultural experience navigating a predominantly-White, privileged, cis-gendered, patriarchal space. While it loosely adheres to a traditional written thesis structure, my approach also serves as a design document and a reflection on process that ultimately strives to, above all, adhere to the Muslim tradition of Tadthakir, which loosely translates as deep reflection and questioning. Under Tadthakir, the epistemic value of a transmission claiming to be truth is in direct conversation with the character and experiences of the individual doing the transmission. And if a “transmission” is to be published in any way, shape, or form, then that author is claiming an authority before G-d that they have the right to make such determinations of truth. Therefore, since I make no claim to be of “high moral character” by the traditional Sunni practice I follow, I’ve developed a structural approach that I hope will hold up if I am to ultimately defend these words before G-d. It is my intention to honor the experiences and research that led me to the claims I shall make herein that HIPE is a type of “Sufi” design methodology while avoiding the mortal sin known as Bid’ah.

Bid’ah” is not simply committing an act that the Prophet did not commit or failing to commit an act that the Prophet actually did. Bid’ah is, rather, committing or avoiding such actions as a means of making up one’s own way to God. In other words, the real issue is not whether an act is committed or not; the real issue is the

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<sup>9</sup>Ellis, 2004; Holman 2005.

religious value that one attributes to the commission or non-commission of an act.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, HIIPE was developed as a way to communicate a process of something “evolving into reality” while also acknowledging that the inherent truth connected to any statement is dependent upon the context of its inception. So it becomes a series of iterations juxtaposed together in order to create meaning rather than some overarching declaration of truth, reality, or authority. This is most important to declare before G-D (but also thesis advisors and committees). While I cannot say fully that what is contained herein represents any whole truth, I can speak to my own lived experiences through this process, and speak to the feeling of wholeness resulting from its creation. That resulting picture created, because of the very fact it is in my heart, I can say is true.

**Figure 5** This circular logic is essential to an attempt to both present new truth but also stay within the bounds of Islamic jurisprudence.

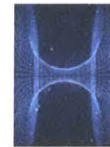


Figure 4

The Realizistance (i3) Lexicon and research methodology works as follows:

- 1) Each chapter herein shows an evolution of thought of my work over the last two years at MIT. I will attempt to preserve the original mediated appearance of that initial work through screen captures.
- 2) Before every chapter of this thesis will be a *Tadthakir Reflection interlude*. It will give the context from which the proceeding ideas, assertions, and experiments were developed.
- 3) After every chapter there will be a script, design doc, or visualization of the creative work that ultimately resulted from that chain of questioning.
- 4) I will use DIGITAL ARTIFACTS [DA] that reflect process and navigation of the institutional space in order to bring to light Black Holes of data and labor that might otherwise stay invisible.
- 5) I will insert WORMHOLES [W] in areas where later reflection changed or informed the initial thought presented.

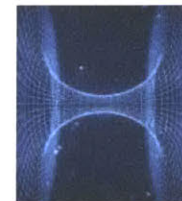


Figure 5

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<sup>10</sup> “Dr. Sherman Jackson – Marc Manley.”

These wormholes connect you to other parts of the document in which two ideas or concepts are in conversation. You can practice using this HIPE mechanic right now by jumping from this Wormhole now cited as [W2](#) on the previous page. Read the sentence before and after the [W] citation. Don't worry, it will get easier with practice. In the transmedia version of this script, these wormholes will be clickable and lead to pop-ups for easier navigation.

- 6) In historical accounts I will change any identifying elements of individuals or entities in order to protect the anonymity of the people or groups that are described herein.
- 7) As the method of research shifts toward production, I will use more and more visual representations of events as digital artifacts [DA] in order to more accurately show process. These [DA] will be aggregated in the Realizistance Asset directory.
- 8) The full version of this work will ultimately be performed live then continue to live online as a transmedia archive of that iteration of the narrative. Therefore this document is a script or design doc for a full performance that is yet to be made.

## **Navigational Politics of the Black Experience in Academia**

If the vulnerability of the personal anecdote at the start of this chapter yielded any response beyond the normal expectation of a thesis proposal introduction, then it serves as an example of how I seek to show that, in order to create viable long term solutions to social ills facing low income Black youth, we need to disrupt the traditional culture of our institutions by using new narrative tools with the power to subvert and transcend the institutionally defined relationships between media consumers and producers. These new narrative tools could be considered subversive as they exist just outside the margins of traditional academic culture. I seek to analyze these margins and speculate what may lie beyond their horizon.

Continuing to ask "*How is it that...?*" led me to this Masters program and this thesis topic. However, as I explored the landscape of critical media pedagogy, with a

focus on Black, Queer, Feminist and social-change media, I started to notice a pattern that left me with more questions than answers. After articulating a plethora of analyses addressing social, racial, sexist, Marxist, and several types of imperialist-capitalist phenomena, the last three lines of many of the texts would often insinuate that someone should create an alternative. In *Cyborg Manifesto* Donna Haraway says, “ I do not know of any other time in history when there was greater need for political unity to confront effectively the dominations of ‘race’, ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘class’ . I also do not know of any other time when the kind of unity we might help build could have been more possible.” (Haraway 297)<sup>11</sup> *But who will do this practically?* Haraway definitely constructs alternative ways of thinking, but how do we develop a pipeline of on the ground activity where the radical ideas and principles promoted by a visionary like Haraway trickle all the way down to hungry thirteen-year-olds washing up in oatmeal water?

In *Moments in Television*, Fiske says, “The question facing progressive critics may now need reversing: rather than asking how it is that the culture industry makes people into commodities that serve its interests, we should now be asking how it is that the people can turn the products of the industry into their popular culture and can make them serve their interests.” (73)<sup>12</sup> Now we were getting somewhere. Fiske even used the expression “How is it that...?” articulated by my Biology teacher.

But more questions arose: How will this be accomplished? What new systems would have to be used? How would this new model/module/network/system operate? Stephen Duncombe, in *Dream Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy* makes further headway in answering some of these questions. He says, “Progressives, long comfortable with disdaining and distancing themselves from Politics in an impure desire, need to learn to speak to it, through it, with it . . . and then move the point. This won’t be easy.” (P 17) He goes on to say, “Spectacular culture is most often designed to manipulate people and take their money, not set the stage for liberty, equality, and fraternity..... The challenge for progressives is to create ethical spectacles....” (p 17).<sup>13</sup> Next he lays out a framework for how one might theoretically go about designing one of

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<sup>11</sup> Haraway and Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto.”

<sup>12</sup> Fiske, “Critical Response.”

<sup>13</sup> Duncombe, *Dream*.

these progressive, ethical spectacles. Many of the examples used don't speak to enough to the nuance of my cultural experience. *How much can I trust you? I've been here before.*

This skepticism left me with even more practical questions. If one follows his advice, how would the design of this new transcendent module, especially if one is coming from a lower income background, be executed with the necessary resources, people, and time, while still managing to subvert the trappings of recreating the oppressive tendencies of its predecessors or the project funders?

This chain of questioning, and experimenting in creating interventions, led me down another path. The quest that had brought me to MIT, to articulate media impacts on low-income Black youth, had shifted to two questions:

- 1) How can we better articulate the need for media that addressed the nuances of the Black experience?
- 2) How can we provide insight into designing from that perspective without conforming too much to the navigational politics of the existing institutional structure to the extent that one would lose necessary connection to those original nuanced experiences?

In other words, how does one throw out the proverbial bath water without tossing the baby? We will explore the process of refining a research and design process in the next chapter. But before we can do that effectively, I will further articulate these nuances and navigational politics through the concepts of Data Realities and Black Hole Data.

# Data Realities

INT. HARVARD CLASSROOM - DAY

Dr. Cornel West occasionally leans on an intricately designed African cane as he struts around the front of a room filled with eager eyes reflecting eager minds. He reads from W. E. B Dubois' Dusk of Dawn and my instincts flare up. This is a moment that will change my life forever.

I hit the record button on my note-taking app and leave my body to float above the room. It's as if I'm watching three generations of myself communing with each other. The past informing the present, the present dissecting the words of the past and sending them into my future.

His knowledge of the text is so thorough (he barely looks down at the page) and he speaks so eloquently that it's hard to distinguish where the text ends and his exposition begins.

DR. WEST

Let go to Let's go to page 656.  
'With the best will, the factual outline of a life misses the essence of its spirit. Thus in my life the chief fact has been race-not so much scientific race, as that deep conviction of masses of human beings absolutely condition the individual destiny of every member of a group. In the spiritual provincialism of this belief, I have been born and this fact has guided, embittered, illuminated and enshrouded my life. Yet, how shall I clarify its meaning for a soul?'

Dr. West pauses and grins wryly at the crowd. Our eyes meet.

DR. WEST (CONT'D)

This is one of the most important sentences in this corpus--  
'Description fails'...



He goes into full Cornel West preaching-mode. I see my father and grandfather (who share the same last name of West) walking with him in every step. Every word.

DR. WEST (CONT'D)

Can't get at it! That's why the artists are not only essential in every way, they are the vanguard. Can't get at it! He says I've been trying to describe it. I'm a social scientist; I'm a historian; I'm a sociologist; I'm trying to describe it, it's failing. I can lay out statistics, I can lay out patterns and tendencies, I can lay out the ways that behavior affects other kinds of behavior- But any description fails. So what do you have to do? Move into... Art.

END SCENE.

[DA#4 Harvard Fall 2018]<sup>14</sup>

From this retelling of an experience at Harvard class, and the quotation of Dubois within the (paraphrased) quote of Dr. West, we gather that there is something inherent in the Black experience that is essential to any holistic attempt at articulating the challenges of low income Black youth. These challenges, specifically when focusing on youth in systems created through White, patriarchal western capitalism like the United States education system, are a blend of the personal, the social, and the political. So I called this experience created by that blend “navigational politics”.

Consider the image to the right. If the red line represents the experience of a first generation, low income Black college student at a predominantly White institution, then each wall they hit before changing direction represents a social or cultural lesson they had to learn through some form of conflict. I call



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<sup>14</sup> A paraphrasing of an actual moment in class based on written notes and audio capture at the time.

these lessons **Data-Realities**. These lessons are inherently political as they are shaped by the political histories surrounding the creation of the rules and policies. Therefore, the act of pushing against them also becomes political as it stems from the oppositional relationship between the rules and policies that are native to the survival experience Black bodies have had in White systems.

Data-Realities<sup>15</sup> could be thought of as first impressions, but first impressions that are consistent from a specific vantage point. This could refer to everyday notions or concepts particular to race and culture. I had never seen a night sky outside of a city environment until I went up to the Upper Peninsula in Michigan. I remember looking up at a sky full of stars and thinking, *this is what the sky actually looks like all the time?* So the reality of



Figure 6

“sky” to an inner city youth who has never been out in nature would what the sky looks like with light pollution. If they see an actual night sky in films or photographs, it is a false reality from the “real” sky that is “real” for them.

In the social arena, the popular idiom “Driving While Black” could be considered a Data-Reality of Black Men when they drive in specific neighborhoods. But if that individual lived in that neighborhood, then his “Data-Reality” of “driving” the very essence of what that symbol means, might be different than his White counterpart who drives in the same neighborhood or his Black counterpart who drives in ... Ghana. Essentially if you are in the room, you inherently contain some multi-dimensional prior journey through the very systems that created the room you are in. Consider the example in [DA#2] and [Figure 1] earlier with the financial advisor. Regardless of what the institute might say on paper, this is my “Data Reality” (based on the data you received so your specific Data-Reality) of the way low-income students are treated at the institution. So how one chooses to respond to these moments becomes both personal, sociopolitical, and, if this is the focus of one’s work, a type of academic navigational social research as

<sup>15</sup> Image credit: [https://www.technewscentral.com/welcome-future-virtual-reality-store-us/id\\_12850](https://www.technewscentral.com/welcome-future-virtual-reality-store-us/id_12850)

a form of resistance. Yet systems of communication have not yet been developed for the full articulation of the symphony of conducting the experiences that must align for your daily navigation of these spaces. Communication media for the personal, sociopolitical and academic have not been intricately designed enough to contain your multitudes; a task more difficult with every layer of marginalized identity unicorns like myself [un](#)/fortunately possess.

It is research without a container. So one must make the container while also documenting the process of its construction. This must inherently be in conversation with its contents.

In addition to the “Data Realities” immediately perceived by the individual, we must acknowledge the fact that these socio-political experiences are not contained within a vacuum. One is constantly made aware of, and confronted by, the navigational practices of peers who traverse the same spaces with different levels of privilege—and the resulting outcomes of their navigation.

Consider [DA#5] to the right. Each square represents “Work.” Let us use the physics equation that  $Work = Force \times Distance$ .

So while two individuals might be in the same space- i.e. an academic institution, and they are tasked with the same goal of creating an end product, then the low income individual is doing almost three times the work based on the distance and force they must consistently output in order to get to the same end. Much has been written about these differences in experiences from James Baldwin to bell hooks to Grace Lee Boggs in Detroit. Our goal here is not to focus on describing the nuance of the experience, but rather to contemplate and experiment with unique ways to visualize it using HIIPE design practices.

In essence HIIPE seeks to experiment with trying to visualize a new approach to the idea of “work” by creating new media tools and design practices that give a new



definition of work that is connected to the social-cultural experience of low-income Black youth.

I came up with the concept of Quasar Work to describe what happens when one deviates from a prescribed path in an existing structure to carve out a unique journey. We'll get into the concept of Quasars in Chapter four. For now, we'll focus on how to visualize the concept. I use the term "X" to represent a deviation. I use X in honor of the Nation of Islam. They used an "X" convention as a way to address the fact that most of the "Surnames" of American Blacks were based on the Surnames of their slave owners. We were taught that the choice to keep the name as an official part of one's identity, given that surnames are a "family" name used historically to show a connection to one's cultural, national, tribal, and familial heritage, was also a choice to inherently submit to the notion that one's beginning was as a slave.

Consider Figure 9. If work equals force times distance ( $W=FD$ ), then Quasar Work ( $QW = F(DX)$ ) Where (DX) represents Distance traveled times (x) the distance gained by the act of X or rebellion. X also represents the process of Data Realities in action as they work to shift the positionality of the ultimate determinant force which is then applied to D. It speaks to a unique type of power of the

marginalized (if it works successfully) that acknowledges a feeling that comes from knowing who you are, where you have been, what it took for you to be in that or any particular situation, and intuitively deciding that you will institute X regardless of the repercussions. This process is inherently instinctive and informed by the instincts and Data Realities that led you to that situation. This often results in a misconception of F (force) because there will be drastic movement that is uncharacteristic of the traditional physics of the space and therefore comes off as overly aggressive (especially when contained within a large Black body). However, this increase of negative force "N F" that pushes back is also factored into consideration inherently and, again, informed by the very instincts and Data Realities that brought one to the room in the first place. NF aren't



Figure 7

inherently “negative” as in bad, but rather a reflection of the opposite force created by **X**. We will explore these NF later as well.

It should also be noted here that my **X** will be inherently masculine as it stems from my identity as a Cis gendered, able-bodied, Queer, Black, American Muslim man. So while I am advocating for the use of **X** as a social construct, I am not making the claim that my particular **X** is void of the very subjective elements of privilege criticized herein. Instead I invoke **X** with the understanding that any increased F as a result of QW will need to be examined for the increase in NF it generates. This privilege needs to stay in conversation with resistance against the historical past of that type of privilege. Though one could argue that as a cis-gendered, able-bodied, Queer, Black, American, Muslim man one’s masculinity is always a conversation in question. This theme and process will become the theme of VR Musical scene number 7.

## Chapter 1: Tadthakir Reflection

Classes started out great. Learning about the space and each other crammed in a small room was a type of forced intimacy. At least I felt that way. So our next few months were a race of reading of the critical media cannon. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was still finishing some final details on the Korean documentary and Street Cred' TV show for PBS but both were in a good place with others working on things.

The next incident came about a month in. There had been a racially charged incident at a lecture. I get a text: Figure 8. I get there to find the whole cohort in discussion. I am told what happened and offer my support. In the weeks after the incident, I looked for the community/department response. Surely an elite institution like this will hire some specialist or dialog facilitator to come in and hold some cheesy workshop while we talk about our feelings.

There was nothing. And the reverberations of what happened were still very much in the air, creating a tension just under the surface of our class discussions. Now I'm feeling kind of weird. What if that had happened to me, is no one really going to talk about it? I don't know how I would respond to that. Weeks later, still no discussion, we were just bombarded by more critical theorists. Hmm, interesting.

It is from this space that the following article was "felt out" as much as it was written based on what I was seeing about the somewhat careless way information and discussions were somehow avoiding things that should be discussed and given the depth of thought that accurately reflects deep science and depth of critical thought.

Over the next few months I would reflect on:

- 1) How were our syllabi and classes structured to support close readings on race and class?



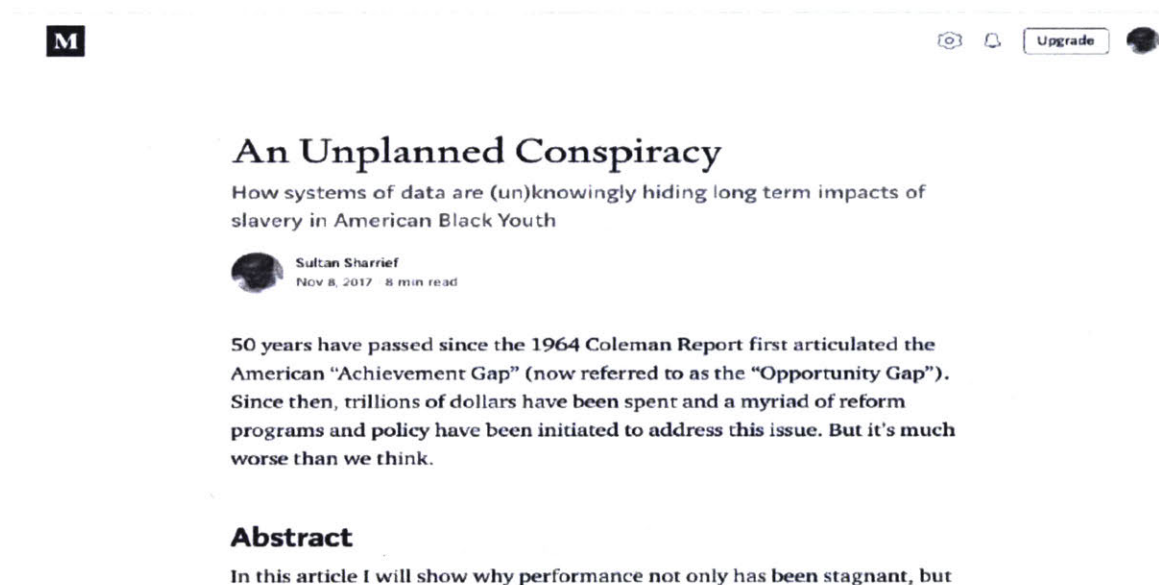
Figure 8

- 2) How were our community values being reflected in and out of the classroom?

## Chapter 1:Black-Whole Data

This quest for unique articulation of a set of experiences led me to the concept of Black Hole data. As we saw with [Figure 1](#) on paper there is a policy and support for low income students to move, and the institution acknowledges class gaps by ensuring there is funding. However the truth lies in the experience of the person who does not fit the mold. Their middle class counterpart would go through the same experience, but it would not create a barrier or conflict of the same magnitude. It becomes a truth that only exists in the experience of the student through their attempts to navigate; i.e. politics of navigation. The name Black Hole would eventually emerge as a way to symbolize this.

Keep in mind that this concept can be applied to any data that are lacking in nuance to the extent that it erases reality (or specific data realities of the marginalized). It is not about policing boundaries of Blackness or making comparisons between the weight of various types of oppression; instead, it is meant to keep us focused on the media (graphs, charts, lines, dots, colors, etc) and the information they fail to contain.



The image is a screenshot of a Medium article. At the top left is the Medium 'M' logo. To the right are icons for search, notifications, and an 'Upgrade' button. The article title is 'An Unplanned Conspiracy' in a large, bold, serif font. Below the title is the subtitle: 'How systems of data are (un)knowingly hiding long term impacts of slavery in American Black Youth'. The author's name 'Sultan Sharrief' is displayed next to a circular profile picture, with the date 'Nov 8, 2017' and '8 min read' below it. The main text of the article begins with: '50 years have passed since the 1964 Coleman Report first articulated the American "Achievement Gap" (now referred to as the "Opportunity Gap"). Since then, trillions of dollars have been spent and a myriad of reform programs and policy have been initiated to address this issue. But it's much worse than we think.' Below the text is the section header 'Abstract' in bold, followed by the text: 'In this article I will show why performance not only has been stagnant, but

Figure 9<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Medium article submitted for CMS Workshop 1 <https://medium.com/@sultan.sharrief>

In this example I will show why performance not only has been stagnant, but is actually worse than most people think. There are four factors that impact this assessment. These are: African/Caribbean Immigration, Drop out rates, Count Day, and Incarceration. I believe these factors are used by various systems and political structures to actually hide a drop in achievement in Non-African, Non-Afro/Caribbean Black (NANCB) youth.

Before I continue with the argument for Black Hole Data, I think it is important to clarify that the reason for this separation of NANCB is ultimately in service of designing interventions. Consider the following anecdote:

My sister was working on a study with the American Heart Association on stroke and hypertension in Black men in the Houston. They were noticing a huge pattern of Black men (of all backgrounds) having strokes and heart attacks at younger and younger ages. But when they went to create treatment plans, they realized that they needed to parse out the differences in “Black” in the root causes. It's called "removing confounders."

They found that many of the African (the continent) men in Houston usually ate major meals at home. More often than not, their wives or women cooked for them and usually prepared food that was heavy in starches and spices and fatty meats. Because many came from cultures where they do not waste/trim the fat off the meat when cooking, they were putting it in with rice, potatoes, etc. They did eat vegetables and salads, but they usually used heavy fatty dressings like ranch or homemade dressings. They also put out lots of bread and people ate bread with almost every meal. So their solution to increased diabetes in African men was to do workshops with African women on healthy cooking and even came up with an interactive recipe website<sup>17</sup>.

For lower income, non-African men in Houston, they found that many of them ate fast food more than they ate cooked meals at home. Many of them also did not have health insurance so they weren't going to the hospital regularly or having their blood pressure checked. They figured out that if you go to places where Black men congregate, you can actually be more effective than trying to get them to show up for studies. So they created a barber shop program where they do health screens at Barber shops and give out

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<sup>17</sup> “Recipe Collections.” <https://recipes.heart.org/categories>



free medication and talk about healthy eating. They even give out vouchers for healthier restaurants to encourage them to change their diet. My sister said to date, this has been the most effective intervention EVER to get a community to respond proactively to health issues.<sup>18</sup>

For upper/middle class, non-African men they found that most of them had health insurance, and many of them ate at home, and they cooked their own food more than their African counterparts. Their biggest issue was a sedentary lifestyle. They worked long hours, usually sitting at desks. When they ate out, because they could afford it, they ate richer meals and usually ate more desserts and more alcohol. They were more tech savvy than their lower income or even African counterparts, so the best intervention was to get them fit bits and try to get them on calorie counting apps that they could use when they ate out.

If they treated all Black men the same (and they had a whole different set of practices for Black women) they would not have been able to find solutions that worked for those populations. With this epidemiology approach of avoiding confounders that I attempt to separate out NANCB youth from African American Immigrant youth or Afro-Caribbean youth.

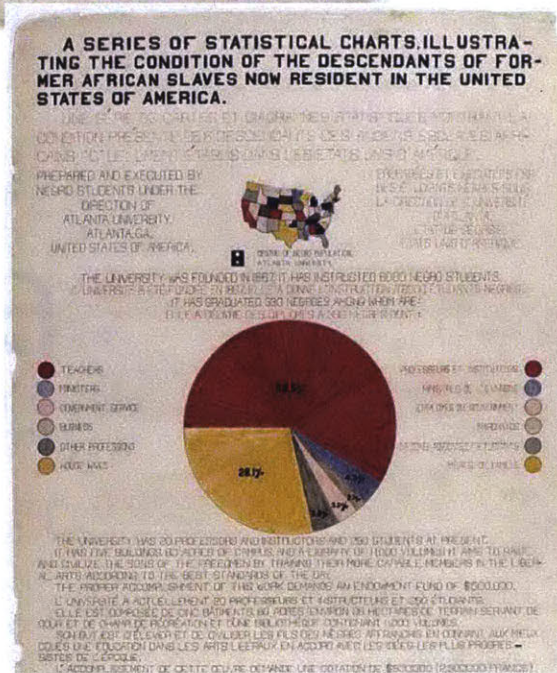
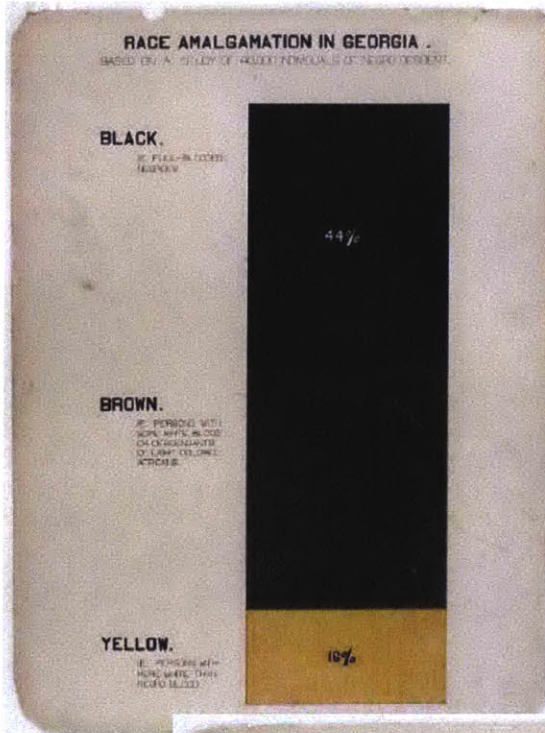
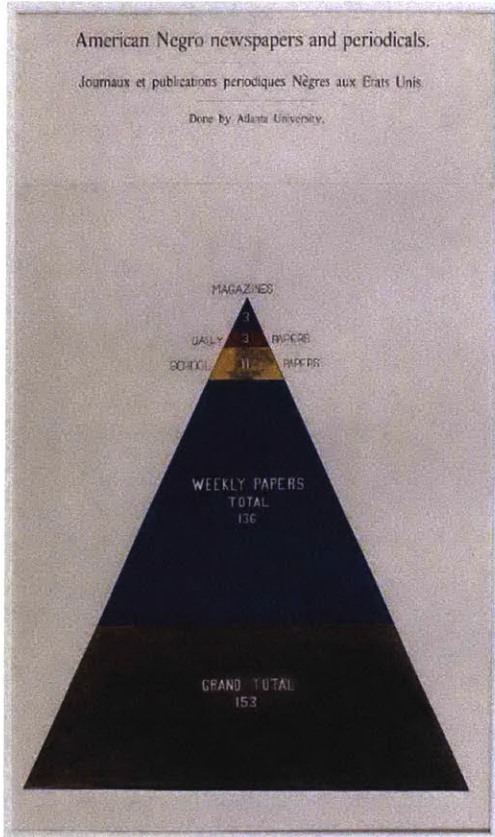
## **50 Year History**

It is regularly articulated that not much has changed since the original report, but I argue that the political system of finger-pointing and deflecting blame have created several Black holes of Data (pun intended) that don't accurately show the deplorable state of Black youth achievement. These "Black-Hole-Data" slant the existing data and I will paint a picture that more accurately shows the existing long-term effects of slavery in American Black youth.

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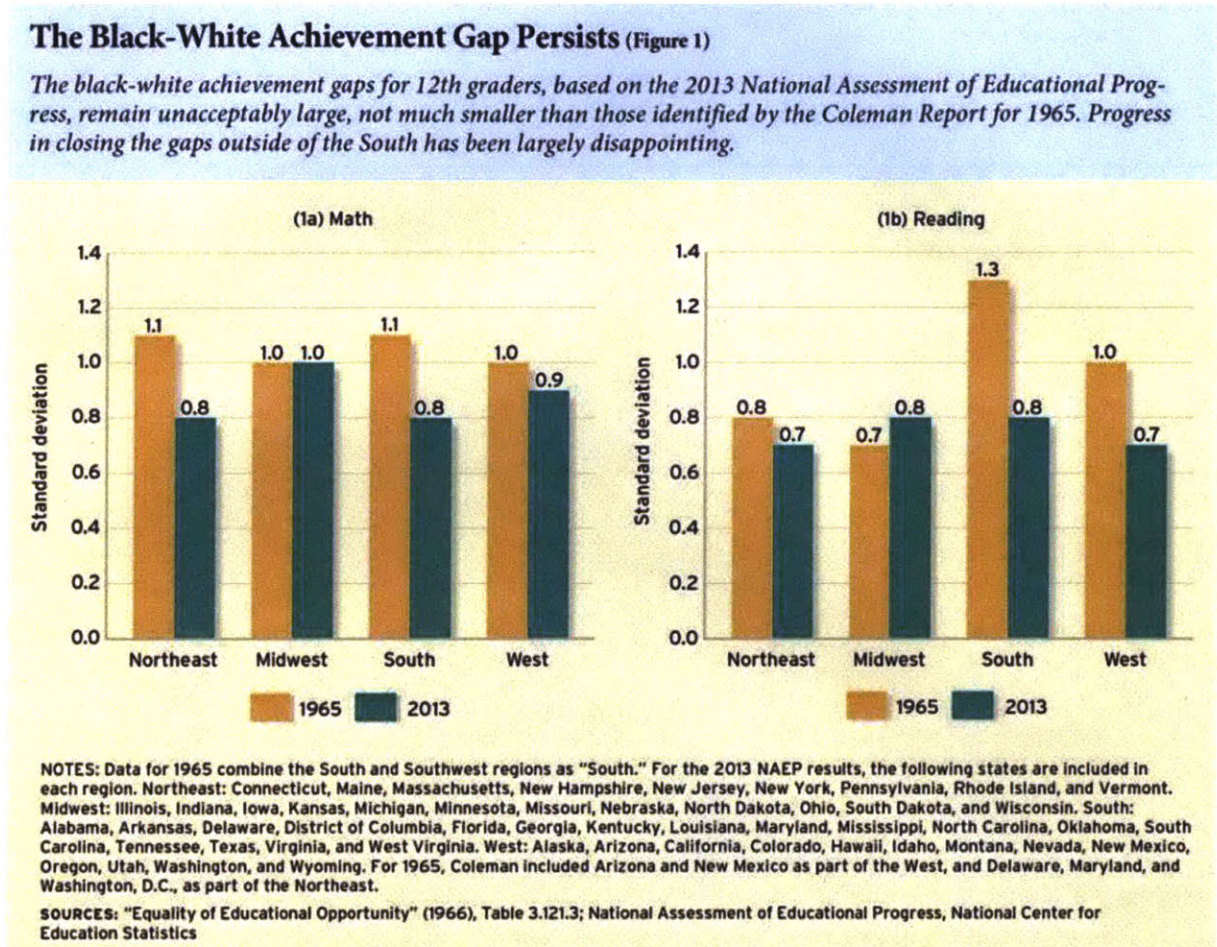
<sup>18</sup> Vise, "One Year Later, Barbershop Intervention Continues to Lower Blood Pressure."

The challenge with using traditional media to articulate Black bodies and Black experience goes back over 100 years. W. E. B. Dubois started tracking progress of American Negroes in early 1900s.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>19</sup> Popova, "W.E.B. Du Bois's Little-Known, Arresting Modernist Data Visualizations of Black Life for the World's Fair of 1900."

In diagram two he uses skin tone (black, brown, and yellow) as classification structures. Despite the challenges of naming this group of people, one can agree that there were all of the same population- decedents of slaves in the United States slave system. However,



our current ways of understanding the framework of race requires much more scrutiny. In 1964 The Coleman Report found, among many other things, that in both math and reading the average black student in grade 12 placed in the 13th percentile of the score distribution, meaning that 87 percent of white students in grade 12 scored ahead of the average black 12th grader. Yet according to the figure below, a 2016 study shows that not much has changed in the size of the gap:

Figure 10: SOURCE<sup>20</sup>

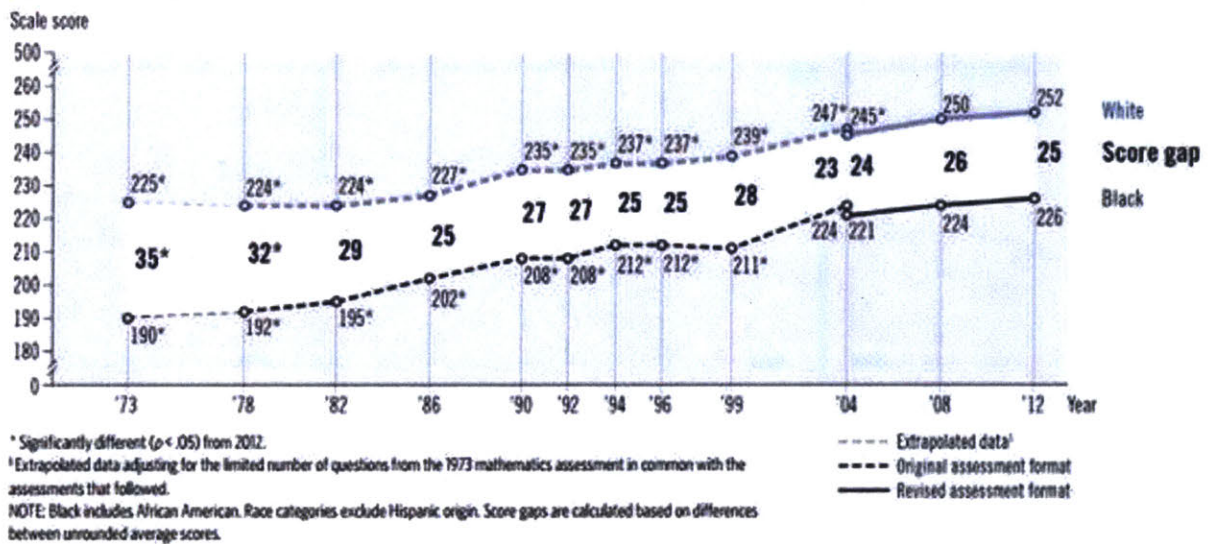
<sup>20</sup> Education Next, Black White Achievement Gap Makes Little Progress

50 years later, the average 12th grade black student, according to data from the 2013 National Assessment for Educational Progress, placed only in the 19th percentile (meaning that 81% of White students placed ahead of the average Black student). In reading, the achievement gap has improved slightly more than in math, but after a half century, the average black student scores at just the 22nd percentile (meaning behind 78% of average White students).

### Hold Your Shock, It Gets Worse

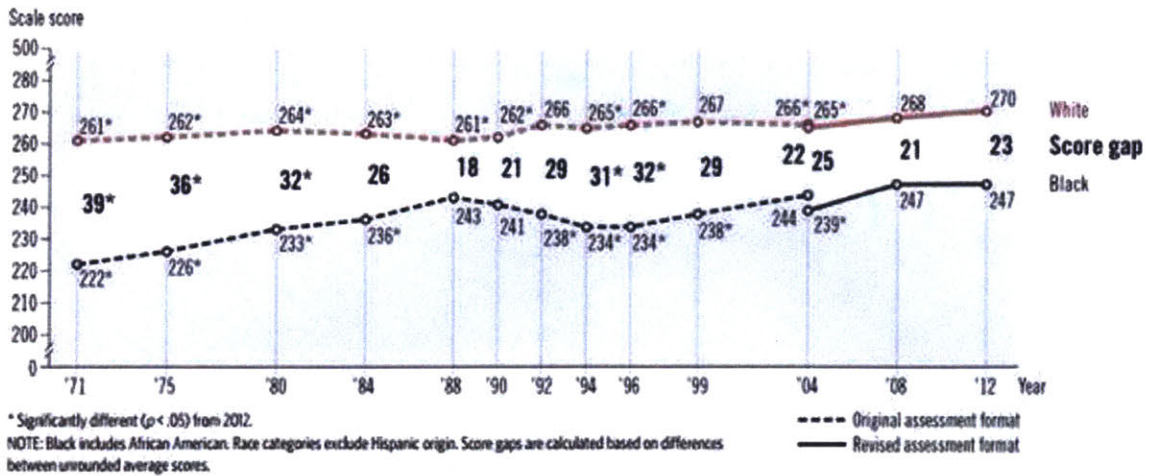
There are many ways to interpret this data and a robust, ongoing argument of causation, proposed solutions, correlations to poverty, teacher trainings, district spending, public policy, and much more. However, before we can even get into proposed solutions, it is necessary to understand the factors that show the reductive nature of existing data. Let's start with the graphs from the 2013 NAEP Report. There are several reports at age 9, 13, and 17 and across reading and math. However, the general trend looks the same.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 23. Trend in NAEP mathematics average scores and score gaps for White and Black 9-year-old students**



<sup>21</sup> Robelen, "NAEP Report."

**Figure 9. Trend in NAEP reading average scores and score gaps for White and Black 13-year-old students**



In both graphs, which represent scores on a range from zero to 500, Black achievement in the early 70s is around 37 points lower than White scores. Over the next four decades there is consistent growth for both Black and White students, with Black students seeing a jump in performance around 1988. But here is a question, WHO/WHAT IS BLACK?

### Immigration

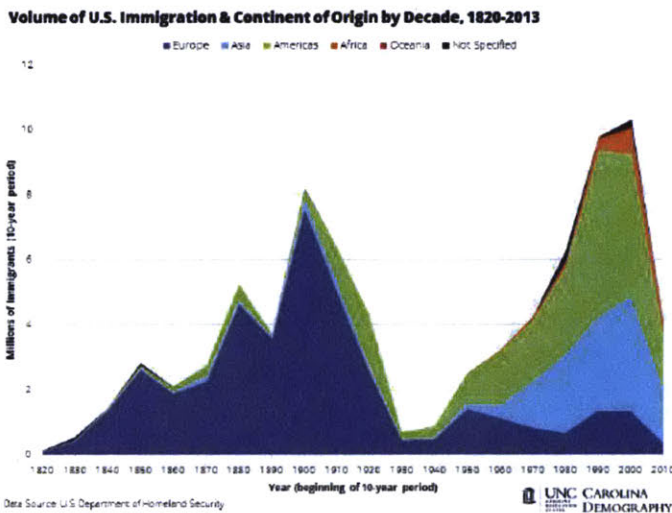


Figure 11

Between 1950 and 2013 there have been over 3.7 million foreign born African Americans which make up almost 10% of the Black population. Also, historically Black immigrants are more educated and tend to have a higher (almost double) percentage of 2 parent households.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Tippett, "U.S. Immigration Flows, 1820-2013."

**How Black Immigrants Compare to Other Groups, 2013**

	Foreign-born blacks	U.S.-born blacks	All immigrants	U.S. population
Total population (in thousands)	3,793	39,892	41,341	316,129
Median age (in years)	42	29	43	37
Median household income	\$43,800	33,500	48,000	52,000
College degree earners (adults 25 and older)	26%	19	28	30
Poverty	20%	28	19	16
Homeownership	40%	42	51	64
Currently married (adults 18 and older)	48%	28	60	50
U.S. citizen	54%	100	47	93
Unauthorized status (2012)	16%	-	26	3.5
English proficiency (ages 5 and older)	74%	99	50	92

Note: U.S.-born and foreign-born blacks include single-race blacks and mixed-race blacks, regardless of Hispanic origin.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of the 2013 American Community Survey (1% IPUMS). For unauthorized status, Pew Research Center estimates based on the 2012 augmented American Community Survey.

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Now stay with me, this gets tricky as we enter the Black-Hole Data. If a Nigerian couple emigrates to the U.S. in 1980, and they have 3 kids in Michigan, those kids are not immigrants. According to the U.C census and most academic system reporting, they are just “Black/African-American”. One box. And when those kids go to school and take tests, and as the data shows, their parents are educated and more likely to stay <sup>23</sup>married than their American

Black counterpart, then they are likely to perform better than American Black students. Now if the foreign born population is 10% of the Black population and that 10% has 2.5 kids that aren’t listed as “foreign born” then actually the percentage of “Child of Immigrant-Black” students taking tests recorded by NAEP are actually closer to 25%. And if 25% of recorded “Black” students are coming from homes with disproportionately educated parents then one can assume that they might dominate the top tier of the recorded NAEP scores. However, from the way the data is presented, this is impossible to tell.

Again here it is important to keep the end goal in mind. More than half of foreign-born immigrants are Afro-Caribbean and carry many similar histories of slavery and discrimination. The African immigrants come from backgrounds of hundreds of years of White colonial rule. The issue here is, if we are to design successful interventions, we need to know who’s who. Like the barber shop intervention developing a youth program in Brooklyn with Trinidadian youth is going to require a different approach than an intervention in Detroit with grandchildren of the great migration of auto workers from the

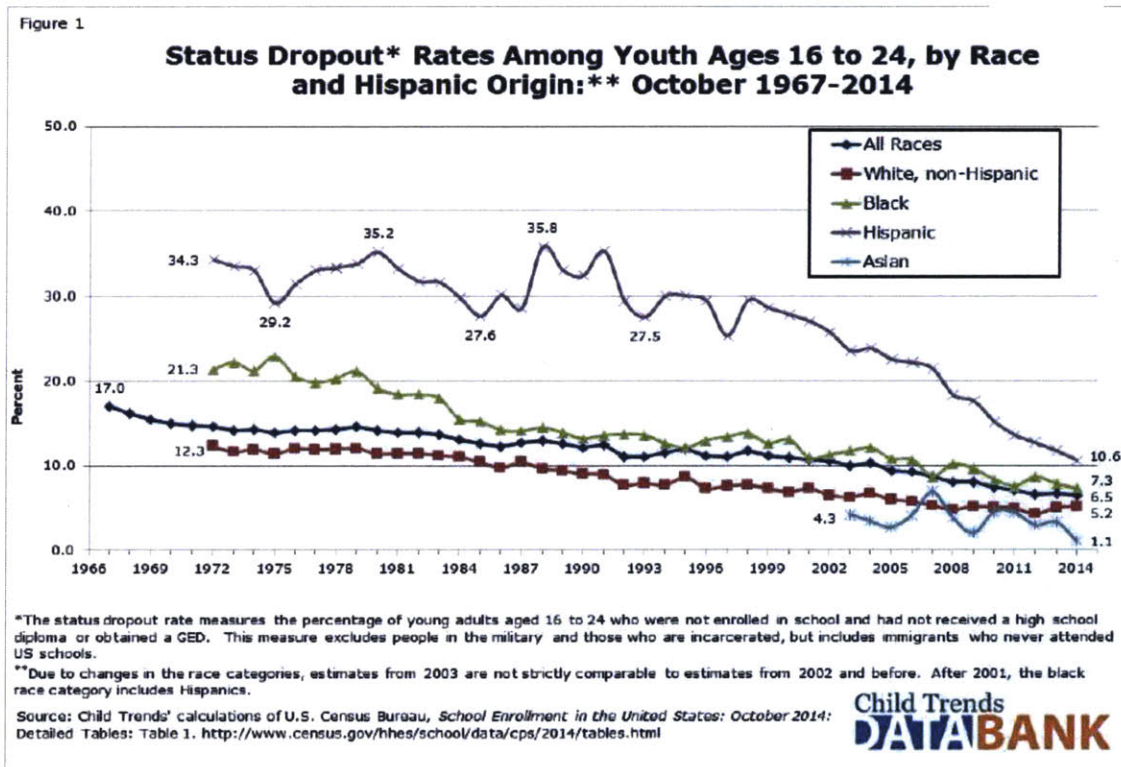
<sup>23</sup> NW, Washington, and Inquiries, “How Black Immigrants Compare to Other Groups, 2013 | Pew Research Center.”

south. Even if their drop-out rates were identical, like our barber shop example, there might be different underlying causes behind those drop out rates and thus their interventions would need to look different.

### Who’s Being Counted – Down The Rabbit Hole

Another hole in the data that skews the results is individuals counted in the first place. You cannot look at Black performance without factoring in the Black students that aren’t in the room. Figure 12 shows drop out rates across race.<sup>24</sup> The graph, and others like it, track drop out rates according to the U.S. census. It shows that, for “Blacks” the drop out rate has gone from about 20% to 7%. This looks nice at first sight, but it also means that 7% of Blacks aren’t being tested by NEAP in the first place. A closer reading shows that this figure doesn’t show incarcerated citizens or those in active military (I looked at several and they all have the same note).

Figure 13



<sup>24</sup> “High School Dropout Rates.”

Experiences being a visiting art teacher in Southwest Detroit, a part of Detroit Public Schools, led me to the following experience. A huge factor that impacts the drop out rate (i.e. students that NAEP isn't counting) is how we count attendance in schools. Most districts use a 2-part count system: a fall count — and a count taken around February. But the October count weighs a lot more — 90% — than the February count. If students are absent on fall count day, the district can still count them for enrollment. A student with an excused absence can be counted if that student attends school within 30 calendar days following count day. A student with an unexcused absence on Count Day can be counted if he or she attends within 10 school days. And a student who doesn't attend on Count Day because they have been suspended, must attend within 45 calendar days of Count Day to be counted. However, because 80% of Black students are low income, an estimated 30% of them change school at least once a year, 12% change school at least twice and 4% change up to 3 times. So the previous process actually works to count the most unstable kids up to 4 times. This fact conflates drop-out rates so they look as if they are much lower than they actually are. The charts below show Michigan school district enrollment shifts over a 10 year period.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “Michigan School Enrollment: Who Won Big, Who Lost Big?”



Intermediate School District	District	Total enrollment '06-'07	Total enrollment '16-'17	Numeric change	% Change ▲
Berrien RESA	Berrien Springs Public Schools	1,749	3,452	1,703	97.37
Ionia ISD	Ionia Township S/D #2	8	13	5	62.5
Wayne RESA	Harper Woods, The School District of the City of	1,246	1,800	554	44.46
Macomb ISD	Lakeview Public Schools (Macomb)	2,956	4,243	1,287	43.54
Wayne RESA	River Rouge, School District of the City of	1,431	2,002	571	39.90
Copper Country ISD	Stanton Township Public Schools	135	181	46	34.07
Copper Country ISD	Grant Township S/D #2	3	4	1	33.33
Genesee ISD	Westwood Heights Schools	1,142	1,482	340	29.77
Ottawa Area ISD	Hudsonville Public School District	5,251	6,693	1,442	27.46
Huron ISD	Sigel Township S/D #4F	23	29	6	26.09
Kent ISD	Byron Center Public Schools	3,133	3,919	786	25.09
Kent ISD	Caledonia Community Schools	3,771	4,713	942	24.98
Kent ISD	Godfrey-Lee Public Schools	1,576	1,962	386	24.49
Ottawa Area ISD	Allendale Public Schools	2,115	2,627	512	24.21
Oakland Schools	Oxford Community Schools	4,291	5,269	978	22.79

Figure 14

Intermediate School District	District	Total enrollment '06-'07	Total enrollment '16-'17	Numeric change	% Change ▼
Wayne RESA	Highland Park Public School Academy System	3,403	352	-3,051	-89.66
Ionia ISD	Berlin Township S/D #3	36	9	-27	-75
Genesee ISD	Flint, School District of the City of	16,636	4,883	-11,753	-70.65
Marquette-Alger RESA	Wells Township School District	19	6	-13	-68.42
Bay-Arenac ISD	Arenac Eastern School District	346	118	-228	-65.90
Marquette-Alger RESA	Burt Township School District	76	26	-50	-65.79
Muskegon Area ISD	Muskegon Heights Public School Academy System	2,016	766	-1,250	-62.00
Wayne RESA	Detroit Public Schools Community District	114,401	45,720	-68,681	-60.04
Macomb ISD	Mount Clemens Community School District	2,413	1,080	-1,333	-55.24
Cheb-Otsego-Presque Isle ESD	Vanderbilt Area Schools	228	103	-125	-54.82
Genesee ISD	Beecher Community School District	1,880	882	-998	-53.09
Oakland Schools	Pontiac City School District	8,800	4,154	-4,646	-52.80
Hillsdale ISD	Litchfield Community Schools	482	229	-253	-52.49
Hillsdale ISD	North Adams-Jerome Public Schools	538	261	-277	-51.49
Van Buren ISD	Covert Public Schools	681	337	-344	-50.51
Gogebic-Ontonagon ISD	Ontonagon Area School District	597	298	-299	-50.08

Figure 15

The Black Hole that this approach creates is that they not only count students multiple times, but they count students when they show up but don't cross reference this with those that aren't there. So that student who changed schools 3 times is listed on 4 different districts attendance.

## Incarceration

None of the charts above factor in incarceration and the growing population of Black youth who end up in the corrections system. When we look at incarceration we see that in 2013 there were roughly 745,000 "Black" people in prison.<sup>26</sup> Now if we make a (possibly problematic) assumption that the average people going to prison aren't positively impacting the NAEP average results

then we start to see that not only are these 745,000 people not being counted, they are

possibly/probably taking out the lower tiers of performance which then skews the graph towards the better performing students. Factors like age and juvenile incarceration need to be factored in of course, the larger point here is that the missing information, again, keeps us from being able to understand how different social factors, or confounders, are impacting these data. If we look at the growth of Blacks in prison we see that it grows exponentially on the same timeline as performance. So part of what NAEP is actually measuring isn't an increase in Black performance, it's measuring how test scores increase when lower performing students drop out or enter the prison system.

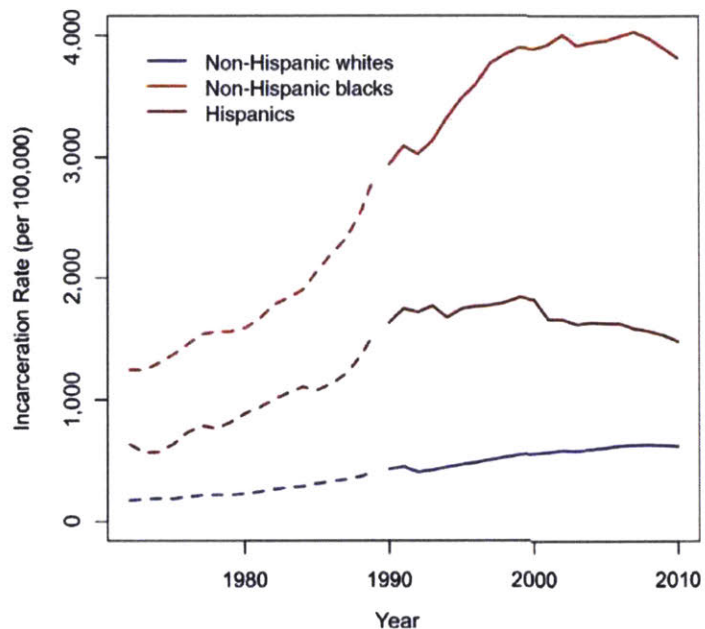
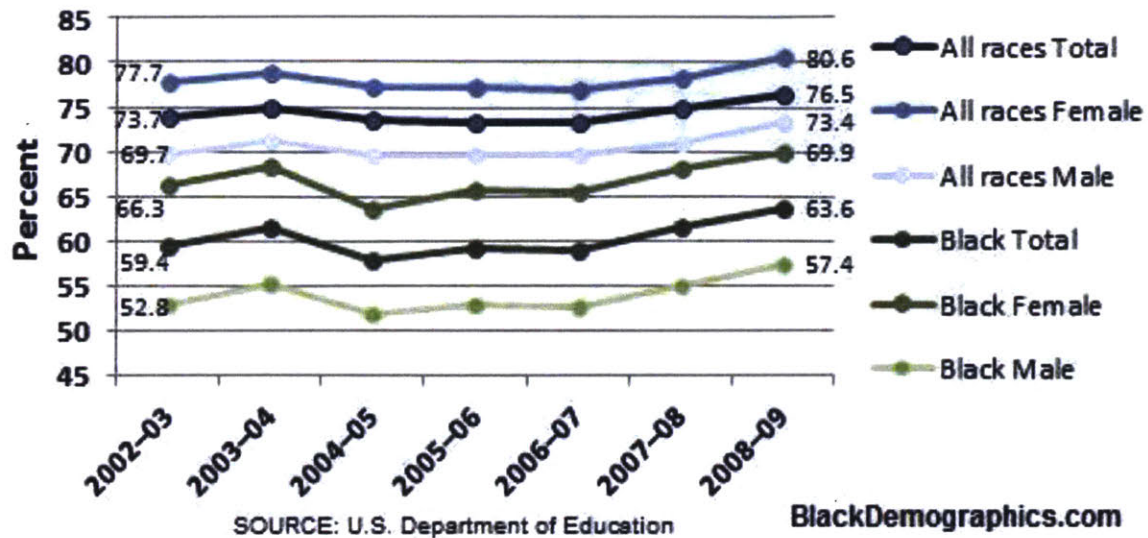


Figure 16

<sup>26</sup> Read "The Growth of Incarceration in the United States."

When we begin to factor these dynamics into “Black” achievement we start to see a clearer picture of the state of American Negro Black youth. The chart below shows a

### High School Four Year Graduation Rate 2002-2009



According to the chart above 37% of Black students aren’t completing high school (Keep in mind that this also reflects those African children of Immigrants that have disappeared into Black-ness). So if we loosely assume that they have a much lower drop out rate, and that a healthy portion of the prison population didn’t see their testing through, then the actual NANCB drop out rate is probably closer to 55%.

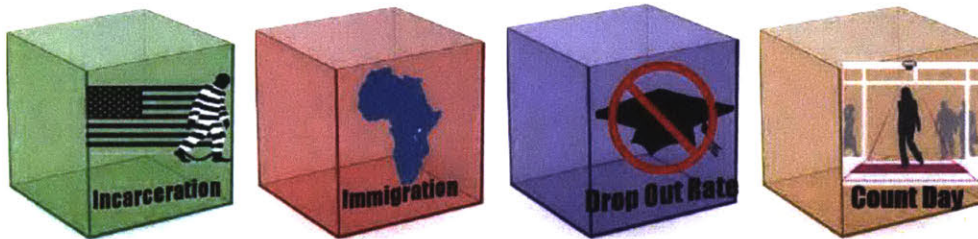
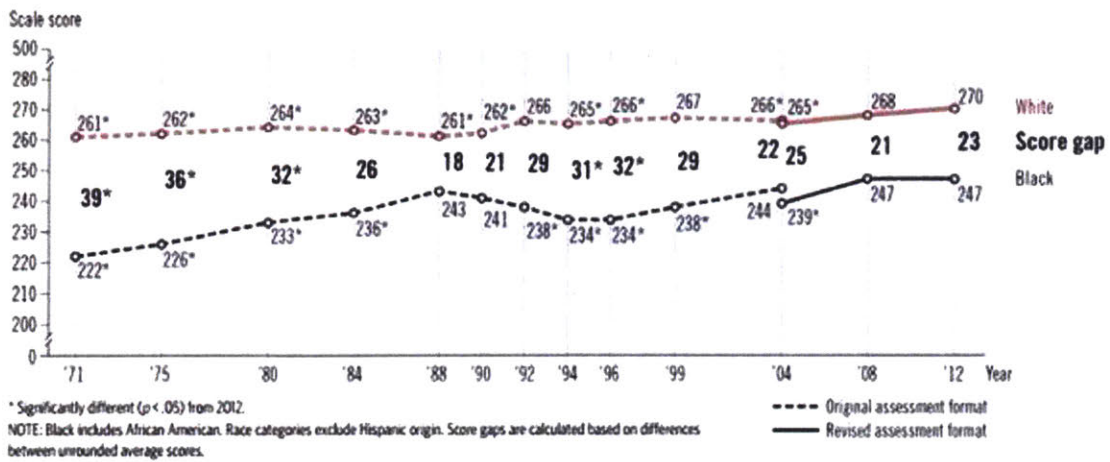
### The Intervention

To try to imagine what this separation would look like, we designed a 3D virtual reality system, Realizistance, that attempts to provide a way to look at these data in a relational context. We worked with a data scientist and UROP students to come up with the following numbers based on pulling information from all the previous graphs into one scenario. The simulation uses blocks to represent test scores or populations, depending on the data. Essentially it attempts to turn the initial achievement gap graph into a three

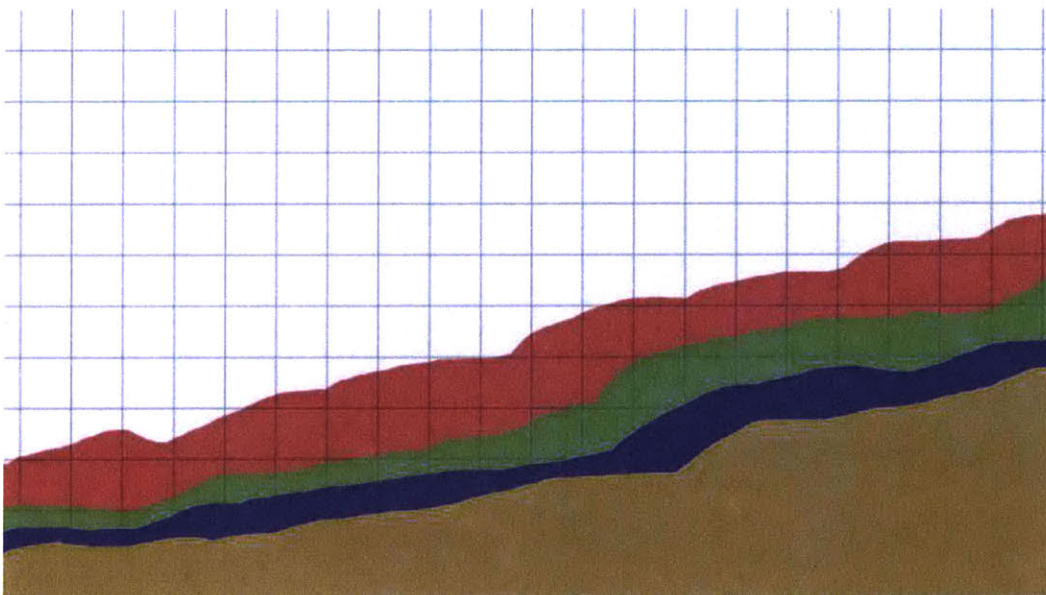
<sup>27</sup> “Elementary & High School Education.”

dimensional object with removable pieces.

**Figure 9. Trend in NAEP reading average scores and score gaps for White and Black 13-year-old students**



For the year 2015, there were 50.4 million students. 8 million of these students were black, and 18% of them were actually African children or children of African immigrants. The average score of black students on a specific standardized test is 247. Assuming that the first generation African students have scores of about 290, factoring out the 18% gives an new average score of 237.



Of the 8 million black students, we could assume that there is an additional 2.9 million number of students who have dropped out and aren't included in this count. Assuming that they have an average score of 222, factoring this in gives a new average score of 230. Alternatively, to eliminate bias, we could assume that the students who have dropped out will have a higher average test score than 222. Recalculating the score based on the 745,000 black youth in prison (again assuming they score around 222) makes 229 the new average score. All of these factors create an 18 point difference between the original average score and the recalculated average score.

### **Performing the Data visualization:**

To represent the score differences, there should be blocks stacked up into a graph (like a line graph. It should almost look like a mountain slope). For each statistical breakdown, a percentage of the blocks (correlating with the percentage from the statistic) should turn a different color. For example, 18% of the blocks turn red to show the high test scores from the children of African immigrants. After the blocks change color, they should be moved to the side to show the new slope of the graph. By the end of the visualization, the user should be able to see a significant difference between the slope of the original graph and the new one.



The design attempts to allow for multiple layers of nuance within any data set. Each of the cubes can actually be programmed with different images or even videos inside. This way, *Caribbean* is not reduced to the specific instance of an image, but rather 20 block of immigration could have 20 ways to represent Caribbean in each one that reflect more nuance of experience. The graph can be simplified by viewing it from one side, however the virtual reality interface we created would allow for a fully immersive experience with the data. The long term goal is to build in different analytics that would help analyze the same data from multiple perspectives.

In addition to using the virtual reality interface to show these Black Hole Data in a three dimensional space, we experimented with doing a dance performance while moving the blocks around in the virtual space. The production will begin with the syllabi of classes. We see the people they've cited. Where they are from and when they were

born. Predominantly White men from European countries illuminate a one-sided map. The men then transform to be transparent. And we see bubbles of thought rising from them as they join the rest of humanity and all those people have bubbles of ideas and creativity emanating from their heads as well. We zoom out to the globe and see the whole world illuminated with full of rising thought. Then all the others disappear and we only see the white men. They look so small coverage such a tiny space on the large and empty planet. We zoom in closer and their predominantly old-white-man faces (like digitized paintings of George Washington or Chris Columbus) reappear and they turn back into words on a page and go back into the syllabi.

[W#8] Script of Black Bird

INT. VR DANCE NUMBER 2 BLACK BIRD -- BLACK WHOLE DATA

Sultan stands in a VR space. He's under a street light on a city block.

SULTAN

In this number we are going to visualize what I call Black hole Data. I believe the way we currently report race and class and the nuance of their intersections is what is keeping us from creating real solutions to social change. Middle class Black Americans have different struggles than African Immigrants which is different from lower income. And rural Blacks have different challenges than inner city Blacks, etc etc. But in most of our institutions and research we only have one box that says Black/African American with no way of cross referencing how those things play out in different scenarios. I call this lack of nuanced data Black Hole Data.

He walks over and gets into position.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

I'll now perform what it looks like to pull data out of the Black hole using the way the Achievement gap is reported. This shows how the Realizistance tool can show complex data sets in a way that honors the experiences, the pain, and the dreams of the people that the data represents.

The music from Nina Simone's Black Bird kicks up.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

This uses Ceasar McDowell's principles of designing for the Margins & Healing from the wounds created by institutional marginalization.

(MORE)



## SULTAN (CONT'D)

So often we represent people with dots or lines on a graph, but the real tragedy is the pain it causes and the ways Black kids internalize the value placed on them.

It's a little girl singing. As she sings Sultans moves the data around in the Realizistance tool. It moves from a mountain in front of him to a different sides of him as he pulls the data apart.

The numbers pop up in chat boxes above the cubes that represent the groups that are moving. It starts with one solid line of the achievement gap. Then that line turns sideways and we see that it is really a giant hill with a steep slant.

As he dances, the ghost of Dan Williams and Mama Cindy float down to dance with him.

We see the line of Black average scores. The White scores pop up over it.

## GIRL

Why you wanna fly, Black Bird. You ain't ever gonna fly.

He swings his arm and we see a Quote in a box. "In 1964 The Coleman Report found that 87 percent of white students in grade 12 scored ahead of the average black 12th grader in math.

## GIRL (CONT'D)

So why you wanna fly Black Bird, you ain't never gonna fly.

Another block pops up. 50 years later 81% of white students scored higher than the average black student. A new box pops up. In reading, the average White student performs better than 79% of Black students-- 2013.

## GIRL (CONT'D)

No Place big enough for holding all the tears your gonna cry.

3.

A new box pops up. But it gets worse. Sultan swings his arm at the top of the mountain and we see several of the top section of the blocks turn green. A text bubble pops up next to them.

Box 1: Between 1950 and 2013 there have been over 3.7 million foreign born "Blacks" which make up almost 10% of the Black population.

GIRL (CONT'D)

Cuz your Mama's name was lonely and  
your daddy's name was pain.

Another box pops up. Box 2: Black immigrants are more educated and tend to have a higher (almost double) percentage of 2 parent households.

GIRL (CONT'D)

And they called you little sorrow cuz you'll  
never love again.

Their 7 million children are not listed as "African" or "Immigrant" but rather Black/African American. They tend to be the highest scoring Black students in American public schools.

GIRL (CONT'D)

So why you wanna fly Black bird you ain't  
never gonna fly.

Another box pops up with a headline: "Immigrant blacks," from families from the West Indies or Africa, make up 41 percent of Ivy League schools, but only make up 13 percent of the black population of 18-19 year olds in the U.S.

GIRL (CONT'D)

So why you wanna fly, Black Bird you aint'  
ever gonna fly.

Sultan pulls them out of the deck and the average score drops from 247 to 237.

GIRL (CONT'D)

You ain't got no one to hold you, you ain't  
got no one to care.

4.

Next a box pops up that says there are over 1.6 million black drop outs that don't take the test. Sultan pulls that group out and the score drops to 232.

GIRL (CONT'D)

If you only understand it, no body wants  
you anywhere.

But the census doesn't count incarcerated citizens or active military service in "Drop out" rate.

GIRL (CONT'D)

So why you wanna fly, Black Bird. You ain't  
ever gonna fly.

So 775,000 incarcerated blacks are pulled out of the count. The average score drops to 229.

GIRL (CONT'D)

So why you wanna fly, Black Bird. You ain't  
ever gonna fly.

The score for Black students was last reported as 229 in 1975. It was the end of the Vietnam War.

## Chapter 2: Tadthakir Reflection

**December 2017**

It was now the end of the fall semester. We had a total of 80 pages to write between the 4 different classes that assigned final papers. I was partially distracted as I was in the process of trying to get released from graduate housing due to the lack of comfort created by a consistent accumulation of passive aggressive racial awkward moments. I was living in MIT graduate housing and it seemed like the instances of passive aggressive racial incidents was increasing dramatically. It was a regular experience to stand in front of the elevator doors and see the person inside jump slightly when I got on. Once, while scurrying out to get a pizza delivery in my pajamas in the snow, an Asian student who was entering the building in front of me let the door close right before I could reach it. I had left my ID inside so I was locked out. I know she saw me, and I know she knew I lived in the building because I had been in line behind her a few weeks prior for the dorm-wide brunch and we had reached for the cream cheese at the same time. I knock on the door as loudly as possible.

With a look of unveiled dread, she came back and opened the door without a word and walked away. I remember thinking, “Are you the one is supposed to design something for me? If you won’t even look me in the eye and we live 100 feet from each other, how could you ever examine my situation the same way you do your work? Would you ever give me the attention you give to your lab or your computer?” In the moment I almost screamed, but I swallowed it and kept moving. These moments of swallowing to keep going continued to add up.

The price point of this domestic experience was \$1500 a month which, on top of challenging one’s patience on the way to get morning coffee, also proved to be too much based on the RA salary that yielded roughly \$2400 a month after taxes. Once credit card bills, food, phone, and any attempts at modern dating were factored in, one was operating from a deficit almost every month. On top of that, I was still paying rent on another apartment that I was subletting out to a family member whose credit wouldn’t let them get the apartment on their own. And on top of that, my mother was in threat of losing her house due to back payments and the other siblings and I were doing our best to share the

burden. Through all of this, I had fallen behind on my own rent payments due to the bad habit of sending money home and letting my other bills autopay before paying rent. I felt I was in a more secure housing situation than either of the other two so I would take on the risk. I begin talks with an administrator who was helping financially.

I had received a \$42,000 Knight Arts Challenge matching grant for our Black Public Media TV show 'Street Cred' (which we had applied for in June) so that was starting to require administrative work as we tried to hire other people.

I was finding the work for my RA position not fully fulfilling so I set up a meeting with another administrator to discuss. I was reminded almost immediately that my RA-ship is what paid my salary and tuition. I was a bit caught off guard as this was not the conversation I was anticipating, but I decided to try to keep my head down and do the work and try to be better about time management and organization.

*End Reflection*

## Chapter 2: Shafrodeen and Disruptions

There is another side to navigational politics that often goes unseen. It is a type of hole in the perception of you- as a former at risk, low-income Black youth that semantics fail to acknowledge. We have several ways of articulating a positionality or perspective or experience: “Low-income Black youth” or “at risk youth” or “marginalized youth” or “disadvantaged youth.” But what are they when they/we grow up? More specifically how is the value of their vantage point articulated as they get older and become parts of different data sets or data realities? Does a hospital staff roster carry a status of *at risk Doctor*; *A low-income academic*? There are few labels that capture the vantage point through which these *at-risk adults* see the world. However, all of the qualities that made one an *at-risk youth*, have not necessarily gone away. In most cases they are intensified by the added challenge of navigating a space that was historically created without them in mind.

What gets lost here is a misappropriation of teeth.

As these youth get older, if they avoid the statistics of negative outcomes that are listed for them, they are lucky to become a “minority” in an institution. The need for more of you gets caught in department focused on “diversity.” There are many valiant and heartfelt attempts made to make the space more comfortable for those from different backgrounds. I have witnessed first hand this work done by many individuals. So the following is not a condemnation of the work done by these allies within the institution, it is rather an attempt at presenting a new way to think about how to be an ally. Follow me down a Black Hole of Shafrodeen or an “at-risk gaze.”

Shafrodeen loosely translates as “path of the circle.” Deen in Arabic can mean “way” or “path” or even “religion.” It’s how one carries oneself or master values or beliefs to which one ascribes. Shafr comes from Sifr, meaning empty or zero or a circle. It can also imply “a confusing way” (origin of Cypher). It can also mean humility or thinking of oneself as nothing (zero/empty/hollow) in the context of the universe. In iteration 1 I called Shafrodeen FBITS. It stood for Frodo Back In The Shire. It was a positionality that arises from a set of circumstances all falling into place in a certain way that yield a specific response based on ones Data-Realities. It is a reference to the J.R.R.

Tolkien character Frodo Baggins in the saga *Lord of The Rings*. It is from here that we might first put its meaning together. At the end of the book series, Frodo and his fellow Hobbits (half-sized humans) return to their peaceful home in The Shire after a death-defying adventure to Mordor to dispose of an evil ring. Along the two year journey they encounter Dwarves, Elves, Magicians, Orcs, evil monsters, and various abominations all intent on their demise. Because of this regular onslaught, they become experts at fighting, and utilizing various tools for their survival. Their instincts with regard to these tools also become finely honed by the time they make it all the way back to their home, which has barely been touched by the evil forces they've been routinely fighting. While having a drink in the peaceful local pub Frodo notices his sword, Sting, glowing blue. Immediately he and the other Hobbits jump up and begin preparing for a fight. They throw tables against the windows, they barricade the door and draw weapons. The bar manager comes over yelling, "What the hell are you doing!?"

Frodo: "Sting is glowing blue."

Manager: "What the hell is Sting and what does it have to do with my tables?!" As he says this, a dozen Hobbits get up and prepare to stop Frodo and his friends.

Frodo: "It is my sword. When it glows blue it means Orcs are near".

Manager: "What is an Orc?"

Frodo stops and stares for a second. He doesn't even know where to begin.

In this instance Shafrodeen is the position Frodo occupies. He has some level of authority based on lived experience. However, he is still at the mercy of the powers of the dominant culture of the manager and his cronies. Frodo is one of them, and is acting on their behalf, but his experience from his journey has put his immediate actions in opposition to the desire of his surroundings. In a way he faces his former self while trying to be his current self in order to save both. Regardless of whatever approach he chooses to take, he is forced into a type of responsibility of action based on his previous experience. He is a Hobbit but not allowed to participate in the culture of Hobbits. In Shafrodeen we face a familiar environment with new eyes that force a position of action.

There is a second element to this concept of Shafroden that comes through another narrative. In book three of Susanne Collins' *Hunger Games* saga Catniss

Everdeen faces a similar dilemma. She has become *The Mockingjay*, a symbol for revolution and uprising. However, as they try to get her to “perform” a motivational speech in order to blast out propaganda videos (“propo”) for the revolution, she is unable to perform. She is not a performer. Her moments of inspiration were all organic and instinctive and when she attempts to read words off a page, her simulacrum, the Mockingjay, cannot be itself.

As a solution, she is thrown into the battlefield and quickly stumbles upon conflict. After shooting down a plane that blows up a hospital she screams in anger. The “propo” director, seizing the moment, asks her what she is feeling, and she gives a speech ten times more inspiring than the words written for the propo. This position is the second element of Shafrodeen, we face the simulacrum of ourselves, the symbol that we’ve become, in order to let our authentic self shine through.

The third aspect of Shafrodeen comes from El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz formerly known as Malcolm X. After returning from the Muslim pilgrimage of Hajj, he writes a letter articulating a shift in perspective. He says,

“Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered white - but the white attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.”

“You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions. This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have always been a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind,



which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth."<sup>28</sup>

This position is the third position of Shafrodeen. In continuously striving to be oneself, he was brought to a place in direct opposition to his previous self. So in Shafrodeen, we face our former selves as we consistently strive towards the right path.

Now let's apply this concept to Academia.

*Is the saggy-pants, potentially gun-toting stereotype the only image you know to fear?  
How sad I am for you.*

If a poor, large Black man on the streets of America promotes fear, it is in part problematic not because of the fact of the fear itself but rather the limited nature of the fear. For the at-risk academic, one might find oneself constantly insulted by people because they are afraid of the wrong thing. One feels like a scorpion feared for his claws while its tail gets looked over. This "tail" however, like Frodo's sword Sting, is a weapon born out of a need to survive. And if it glows blue one might be moved to swift, aggressive action purely out of instinct for survival. However, due to NF, Figure 7 this action for the collective survival of the community can be perceived as the same aggressive action of the stereotype on the street. However it is different in the context of the Shafrodeen position and therefore requires a different reading.

In some cases the culture of advocacy as a response can also be problematic. According to one's neo-liberals peers you are the poor disenfranchised who don't have a chance against the system. *How little of the world you must understand.* The perspective of the neoliberal peers is almost more damaging because they are so quick to talk about the social ills of the system, they don't have a measuring mechanism based on the fitness one gains from navigating that system. They have a narrative for the act of wounding, the wound, and perhaps the scar, but not of the thick skin that grew from its consistent need to heal. If a scar is the visual representation of the fact that a wound has happened, then scar tissue becomes the substantive by product of having healed. It is an internalization of

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<sup>28</sup> X and Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

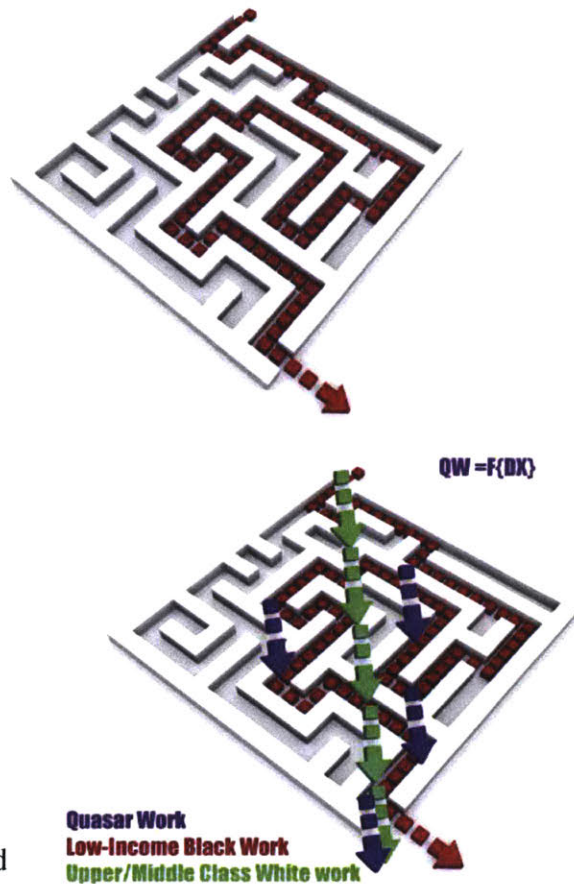
the scar. The scar is Shafrodeen. Healing has become an instinctive act, and sometimes even pre-emptive. If one's work seeks to be healing through others based on a past of pain then one almost has to be conniving about creating healing structures. As a type of waging love, one takes in narratives of disruption and attempts to twist them to fit a lived experience.

The words of Scar from Disney's *Lion King* begin to come to mind as I navigate residential and academic spaces at MIT in this body:

I know that your powers of retention  
Are as whet as a warhog's backside  
But thick as you are pay attention  
My words are a matter of pride

It's clear from your vacant expression  
The lights are not all on upstairs  
But we're talking kings and successions  
Even you can't be caught unawares

So prepare for the coup of the century  
Be prepared for sensational news  
A shiny new era is tip toeing nearer  
(*And where do we feature?* asks the (White)  
Man) Just listen to teacher  
I know it sounds sordid but you'll be rewarded  
When at last I am given my dues  
And injustice deliciously squared, Be Prepared



See what these particular Black Hole Data do is create a lack of narrative of cumulative experience with respect to design. If one is actually trying to close the achievement gap, one sees it as an ongoing design challenge. So the more the challenges of the system that are thrown at the individual navigating, the more "data" they are given about how the

system works and what are its pitfalls. So if one chooses to design from this perspective, one finds opportunities for solutions hidden in other forms of innovation. This is the lense of Shafrodeen. In some sense, it is a poor, Black gaze to challenge the White gaze.

See most academic interventions are limited to the scope of the institutional framework they serve. If a project is for a semester, a two-year thesis, or a five-year dissertation, then the thought of what is “realistic” with relation to taking on the design challenge is limited to that particular space time and delivery system. However, if one puts the long-term goal in front of the short-term steps taken to get there, it opens up a world of possibilities.

Consider the following: one self-driving hybrid Toyota has over 24000 patents. These have continued to evolve in the 80-year history of the company. Each time a new need was articulated, and as technology was created, that innovation was added to the automobile. Then, a final product becomes one machine with thousands of moving, interacting technological pieces that make it versatile enough to accomplish the necessary task of driving. The very basic automobile functionality of ball bearings and pistons is combined with computer vision and AI to create one machine to mimic the hundreds of small decisions a good human driver would have to do.

What would a social program/platform/structured intervention look like if it was a continued evolution of one train of thought that took anything useful and added it to the design? Is there some multi-functioning social or technological innovation whose tiny moving pieces resulted in social change? I begin analyzing what I saw to be a huge opportunity that went totally overlooked: the Ice Bucket challenge.

Figure 17

Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) earlier that day, and realizing the lack of progress that had been made for the disease since the diagnosis of its pop culture namesake Lou Gehrig in 1939, he declared that he would reach influencers of the likes of Bill Gates in order to create change. Two years later, not only was that goal reached, but it created a social phenomenon, the Ice Bucket Challenge (ICB) that would sweep the world. As of September 1, 2014 more than 17 million videos related to the Ice Bucket Challenge were shared on Facebook alone, and these were viewed more than 10 Billion times by more than 440 million people.<sup>29</sup> This is 100x more viewers than the Super Bowl.

What began as a personal tragedy was transformed into a family effort and then became a worldwide phenomenon. The start of the ICB is murky at best. Various people began to use the hashtag #IceBucketChallenge in different ways for activities varying from jumping into icy lakes to timing how long one could hold a hand in a bucket of ice water without pulling it out. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the core eight-week period of July 2014 through September 2014. Over 200 million dollars were donated to ALS organizations. Of that, 115 million went specifically to the ALS foundation. This was an increase in over 3000% in donations from their normal 2.8 million average during that period.<sup>30</sup> Two years later these funds lead to the success of project MinE, which discovered gene NEK1, an inherited trait that leads to ALS. The

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Y. Ni et al., "Transmissibility of the Ice Bucket Challenge among Globally Influential Celebrities: Retrospective Cohort Study," *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 349, no. 7898 (December 20, 2014): g7185.

<sup>30</sup> Gallo, "How Pete Frates Found His Calling And Launched The Ice Bucket Challenge."

ALS foundation, which funded project MinE, relates the success directly to the Ice Bucket Challenge.<sup>31</sup>

These facts lead to several questions. What type of nonprofit could have organized 440 million people towards a specific type of civic participation? What kind of research entity could have made a scientific discovery in two years in a field that had not made significant progress in over 75 years? What type of media conglomerate could have created a media phenomenon that would garner 100 times the viewership of the Super Bowl? The answers to these four questions all point to one fact: the Ice Bucket Challenge serves as a unique media event that has roots in transmedia storytelling, civic media, and social entrepreneurship.

The Ice Bucket Challenge represents a particular typology of transmedia that I call a *5th Dimensional* transmedia text. This refers to the way that one entity can occupy five different dimensions of existence: mass-media + individual media + civic + financial = real world change. It also plays on the mathematical 5<sup>th</sup> dimension in which time and space are folded so that greater distances (or progress) can be traversed in a relatively short amount of time. In this paper I will argue that, not only did the ICB serve as a new 5<sup>th</sup> Dimensional model for community generated transmedia texts, it would also create an example of the ways new media culture and technology can be used to disrupt the traditional non-profit economy through a crowd-sourced, social-entrepreneurial approach to fundraising. First I will explore the Ice Bucket Challenge in relation to theories of transmedia text and their conceptualization. Next, I will examine it in relationship to micro-celebrity and a type of micro-industry of structured storytelling. Finally, I will examine the ways the ICB subverts the traditional political economy by embodying principles of social entrepreneurship that deviate from rhetoric condemning the internet as a site of net slave labor and capitalist reframing of democratic principles.

## **A History of Transmedia Texts**

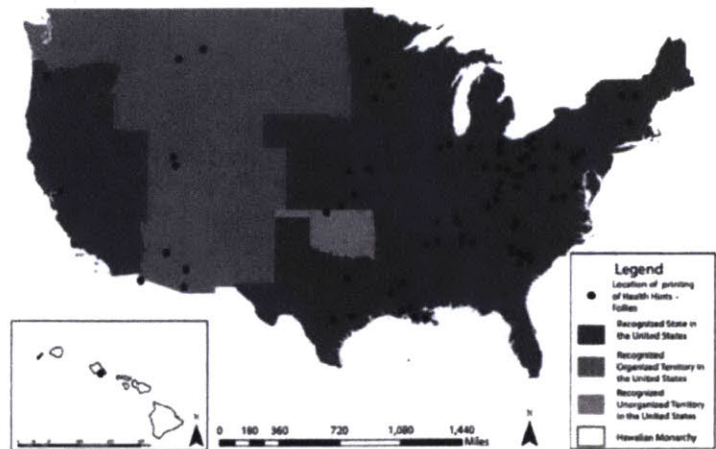
An early usage of the term “Transmedia” as it relates to storytelling can be attributed to Marsha Kinder. According to Sasha Costanza-Chock, Kinder developed the

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Sohn, “Fundraising: The Ice Bucket Challenge Delivers,” Comments and Opinion, Nature, October 18, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1038/550S113a>.

concept of “transmedia intertextuality” in the 90’s to “refer to the flow of branded and gendered commodities across television, films, and toys. Kinder was interested in stories and brands that unfolded across platforms, and took care to analyze them in the context of broader systemic transformation of the media industries.”<sup>32</sup> Later Henry Jenkins would describe it as a flow of content across multiple media channels.<sup>33</sup> He explains that, ideally, transmedia storytelling should facilitate creative expansion by exploiting the creative capacity of each media platform. However, the phenomenon of transmedia stories, in particular as they relate to notions of “virality,” can be traced back to the 1800’s. Between 1862 and

1899 a newspaper story called “The Follies” (among other titles) was one of the most widely reprinted stories of the nineteenth century, appearing at least 136 times and moving between coast to coast.<sup>34</sup> The story, which was a collection of helpful health hints, was picked up,



rewritten, reprinted under new titles, and redistributed over three decades. It was one of many stories that exemplified this trend and rarely did anyone have any idea that stories like this were traveling so far. It was noticed by a reprint algorithm in 2015. While this example deviates from the ontology Jenkins and others have attributed to transmedia, it does show a larger pattern that is relevant to our study; Stories resonate with different people in different places. And while those stories might, on a macro level, be a part of a national or global pattern, they exist as an individual narrative for those that encounter them.

To return to the modern notions of transmedia, it represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery

<sup>32</sup> henryjenkins.org blogpost “On Transmedia and Transformative Media Organizing.” June 1, 2015

<sup>33</sup> Emma Beddows ebeddows@groupwise.swin.edu.au, “Buffy the Transmedia Hero,” *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique*, no. 24 (November 2012): 143–58.

<sup>34</sup> Ryan Cordell, “Viral Textuality in Nineteenth-Century Us Newspaper Exchanges,” in *Virtual Victorians* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015), 29–56, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393296\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137393296_3).

channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.<sup>35</sup> This has been seen in two ways: a top down or auteur approach in which one designs a vast narrative experience to play out across different platforms, or secondarily, in a participatory model where multiple individuals participate in a type of structured storytelling that blends fan culture with participatory engagement. The latter is not to be confused with *adaptation* in the sense that multiple texts are used to convey one “spirit” of a text, but rather that involves the sharing of a single “narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium.”<sup>36</sup>

One of the first major narratives to use the primary model was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The Buffy universe includes a movie in 1992, a television series 1997 to 2003, a spinoff television series, *Angel* 1999-2004, a comic book series 2000-02, and a final comic series, *Angel and Faith* 2011 to 2015. This world is often called the “Buffy-verse” and represents a regular interaction between creator Joss Whedon and fans, actors, and other producers along the way. Given the trans-semiotic context of transmedia formats, the aesthetic condition of the narrative changes markedly throughout the course of the story; the very nature of transmedia storytelling relies on the uniqueness of each platform to offer a distinct variety of storytelling. Christy Dena describes the instrumentality of transmediation as polymorphic, claiming a polymorphic approach to the production and experience of a work is informed by a schema where all media are created equal. Polymorphism privileges the complexity of many forms above reproduction.<sup>37</sup> Here she asserts that these “polymorphic” creations are unique in that they represent a larger schema of equal parts. All of the elements of the Buffy-verse work collectively to form the whole text. It is an organism comprised of smaller cells, each with a unique contribution that, when working in unison, form the whole.

This polymorphic notion is also seen in a range of transmedia projects that were generated as part of advertising campaigns for books. The young adult novel *Cathy’s Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233*, had more than half a dozen working phone numbers. To fully experience the narrative of this book, readers would call voicemail

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<sup>35</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment: An Annotated Syllabus,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 6 (December 2010): 947.

<sup>36</sup> Beddows, “Buffy the Transmedia Hero.” 144

<sup>37</sup> Beddows. 145

numbers using passcodes they discovered while reading the book and could also visit many websites that were hidden in the backgrounds of photos, released in private conversations, and systematically planted in fan chat forums.<sup>38</sup> This model used transmedia elements specifically to engage young audiences, creating a game-like scavenger hunt quality to interacting with the narrative. The functionality of the multimedia design represents a unique type of interweaving of narrative, marketing, and sales. Evidently as soon as the books hit the shelves, passersby would call the number on the cover just to see what happened. Many were converted into purchasers, as they would get text messages from the number after their initial call.<sup>39</sup> This strategic design of the multi-platform transmedia text is an important factor that we'll come back to upon closer analysis of the Ice Bucket Challenge. In describing the endless possibilities of transmedia text, Antero Garcia says they mimic real life in that they are sticky - no matter where one turns it's always present; they are messy - never told linearly and sometimes hard to find; and they are interest driven - guided by the motivations of participants.<sup>40</sup> All of these traits can also be applied to the Ice Bucket Challenge.

In the second approach to transmedia storytelling, a framework is created within a larger narrative universe and participants are able to reconstruct those narrative mechanics to fit a personalized narrative. Jenkins says, "We should be clear that narrative represents simply one kind of transmedia logic that is shaping the contemporary entertainment realm. We might identify a range of others - including branding, spectacle, performance, games, perhaps others - which can operate either independently or may be combined within any given entertainment experience."<sup>41</sup> By opening up the "transmedia logic" beyond an auteur narrative lens, it expands the world of transmedia texts to include gamified non-linear narratives with multiple participants. This can be seen in the gameplay of the popular fantasy tabletop role playing game Dungeons and Dragons. A story world is created and the rules of that world, from magic spells, troll qualities, and experience points to unscripted "campaigns", allow players to create an endless amount

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<sup>38</sup> Antero Garcia "A NARRATIVE ACROSS PLATFORMS: Transmedia, Politics, and Encouraging Youth Authorship Anywhere and Anytime," *Literacy Today* (2411-7862) 35, no. 2 (October 9, 2017): 34-35.

<sup>39</sup> Garcia.

<sup>40</sup> Garcia.

<sup>41</sup> Henry Jenkins (2010) *Transmedia Storytelling and Entertainment: An annotated syllabus*, Continuum, 24:6, 943-958, DOI: [10.1080/10304312.2010.510599](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2010.510599). 945



of experiences based on the rearranging of predetermined game mechanics.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, the transmedia logic represents a relational framework of storytelling as much as it does a narrative device. This realm is also often called structured storytelling. It doesn't remove the creative agency of the individual participants, but it does structure their creativity within a world with rules, logic, and overall story arch. Again this dynamic becomes important as we look at the Ice Bucket Challenge as a form of structured storytelling.

Transmedia texts also serve as a migration of televisual traits into an online, often nonlinear world. This is seen in the Buffy-verse but also in specific television expansions into online platforms like webisodes. As webisodes appropriate the conventions of television episodes, they can be seen as extending both the story and the nature of television drama production. Webisodes are often viewed simply as shorter additional versions of television programs; they are often produced by the core creative team and feature 'stars' of the show.<sup>43</sup> They were initially viewed from a purely business context, as practices that emerged as a form of aggregating fans of cult programs to facilitate conglomerate structures of merchandise/engagement for subsidiaries.<sup>44</sup> However, the initial use of TV industry webisodes began to shift as they spawned new interfaces of social interaction. Marwick and colleagues argue that transmedia extensions through social media of Glee are used as a space for increasing engagement beyond the narrative of the show. These spaces can help audiences to negotiate adolescent understanding of sexuality and acceptance.<sup>45</sup> This expansion from a televisual industry context to a site of social, civic work will continue to grow. The Glee videos expanded outward even further and connected to the popular "It Gets Better" campaign in which celebrities told short narratives about anti-LGBTQ bullying to inspire audiences as part of an anti-suicide campaign. Webisodes also moved beyond the televisual space to serve as a source of original content that spawned their own transmedia universes. In a study of YouTube star Felicia Day's cult fandom around her 2007 web series *The Guild*, we see the beginning of

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<sup>42</sup> Bethany L. Abrahamson, "Dungeons and Dragons on Collaborative Writing: What the Inklings Might Have Learned," *Mythprint* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Loads, "Transmedia Television Drama: Proliferation and Promotion of Extended Stories Online," *Media International Australia (8/1/07-Current)*, no. 153 (November 2014): 42.

<sup>44</sup> Loads. 45

<sup>45</sup> Loads. 43

an expansion of transmedia storytelling into a unique model that blends traditional entertainment industry brand building with a type of micro-celebrity. In an essay by Elizabeth Ellcessor she says, “explaining Day’s position in the entertainment Industry is difficult. Her web series draws on the codes of serial television, the aesthetics of webcams, and the content of gaming. She uses social networking sites to connect with friends, co-workers, and fans alike, while also using it as a promotional venue for *The Guild* and her other projects. These activities combine old and new media forms, but do so largely outside of the mainstream corporate entertainment and celebrity industries.”<sup>46</sup> She goes in depth into the practices of Day to show a growing pattern where content creation blends with a type of personal branding in a strategic attempt to grow viewership and spur creative development. Day’s use of new media strategies as part of a repertoire of transmedia storytelling techniques can also be seen in the success of her music video, *Date My Avatar*,<sup>47</sup> created to launch season three of *The Guild*. The video was directed by Joss Whedon’s brother, featured his wife, and was tweeted by Whedon to millions of followers. In this sense, the creative development of the content was inseparable from the branding of the show.

Online transmedia also builds on the notion of “Liveness” that Feure talks about in *Traits of Live TV*. These affordances include the illusions of “liveness” and interactivity presented online, the quotidian rhythms of interaction.<sup>48</sup> Here she talks about the way traditional celebrity is shifted by the ability of self-branding and the way social media cultures allows for a type of extension of a celebrity persona into a live space. In doing so it creates a type of para-text that exists outside of the original character for which a celebrity might be known. We see here also, the beginnings of a more democratic approach to commanding attention which aligns social media with the fracturing of mainstream media’s hold on the masses. This power was even recognized by the traditional television industry and caused challenges for the traditional development pipeline. Denise Mann states that show runners on programs like *Lost* are becoming ‘brand managers’, and ... as transmedia franchise ‘auteurs’ adapt because ‘new

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<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Ellcessor, “Tweeting @feliciaday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom,” *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 48.

<sup>47</sup> The Guild, *The Guild - Do You Wanna Date My Avatar*, accessed December 20, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urNyg1ftMIU>.

<sup>48</sup> Ellcessor, “Tweeting @feliciaday.” 50

technologies and viewing practices ... demand they produce original content for internet sites and blogs, DVDs, podcasts and books.’<sup>49</sup> So the televisual traits of transmedia storytelling didn’t have a silo effect, but rather spurred a new type of competition for engaging with audiences on multiple fronts. The study of Felecia Day and the way she bridged televisual storytelling with the affordances of micro-celebrity as a means to connect with audiences across multiple fronts becomes important later as we look at the Ice Bucket Challenge as a platform for leveraging micro-celebrity as part of a larger narrative. We’ll explore this relationship of storytelling, personal branding, and the capacity it creates for civic engagement.

### **The IBC; Is there a text in this Viral media phenomenon?**

Now that we have looked at various traits of the transmedia text, we will examine more closely how the Ice Bucket Challenge both fits into this logic as well as innovates a new paradigm that facilitates its unique 5th Dimensional complexity. Overall the IBC fits into the second type of transmedia concept mentioned above: the participatory structured storytelling version. The mechanics of the challenge worked like this: A participant nominates someone in their network on social media to take part. If the challenge was accepted, the nominee was recorded tipping a bucket of ice water over their head and challenging someone else to participate. The video was uploaded to social media where the participant tagged their nominee(s) and concluded the challenge by donating funds to their chosen charity. The basics of the structured storytelling model are inherently clear. The process, and the culture around it, was structured like a game. If you chose to participate in the game, you abide by the pre-determined rules of the game. Though the participants ranged from kindergarten students, to famous celebrities, to politicians, the mechanics remained consistent: a nomination on social media, a video, ice water, a bucket, tipping of ice bucket, posting video online, tagging friends in video, and finally donating to charity. Similar to a campaign in Dungeons and Dragons, participants could make this process as complicated or as simple as they desired.<sup>50</sup> Bill gates used a bucket rigged on a lever and string to dump his ice. Morris Chestnut was sitting on a tennis court

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<sup>49</sup> Ellcessor. 52

<sup>50</sup> Abrahamson, “Dungeons and Dragons on Collaborative Writing.”

and one friend pretended like they were dumping a small bucket, while two more friends came up behind with a giant trash can of ice. Henry Caville did his while wearing his Superman costume on the set of a film. MTV's *Prank* crew did 10 buckets in a row thrown directly at their face. While there is an unending list of deviations from the straightforward approach, the mechanics of the story always stayed the same and thus unite the various videos and various authors under one larger textual narrative. This also speaks to Stuart Hall's notion of a text's relationship qualities at various levels of its existence. He says, "The 'message form' is a determinate moment; though, at another level, it comprises the surface movements of the communications system only and requires, at another stage, to be integrated into the social relations of the communication process as a whole, of which it forms only a part."<sup>51</sup>

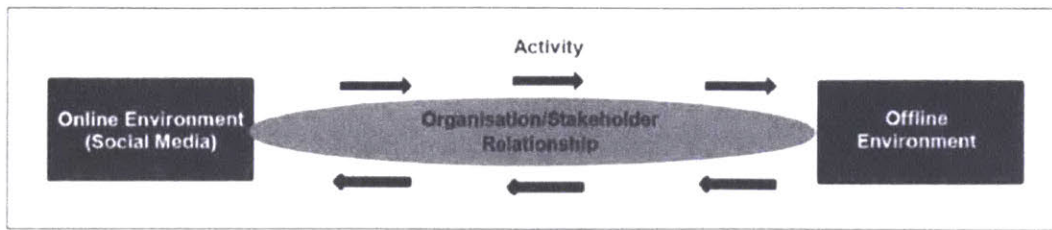
This relationship of the 'message form' to the surface moments of a communication system can be used to frame the unique factor of the Ice Bucket Challenge, what Karen Sutherland calls the Propinquital Loop. Specifically, this loop distinguishes the IBC from other forms of structured transmedia narratives like *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Cathy's Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233*. Sutherland applies propinquity, a component of Kent and Taylor's (02) dialogic theory, to explore how the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge leveraged a propinquital loop (and chain), to enable participants to move between social media and offline spaces, while creating relational elasticity between participant and cause.<sup>52</sup>

*Figure 18*

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<sup>51</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen and David Morley, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 2006). 62

<sup>52</sup> Karen E. Sutherland, "Using Propinquital Loops to Blend Social Media and Offline Spaces: A Case Study of the ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge," *Media International Australia (8/1/07-Current)* 160, no. 1 (August 2016): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16651138>.

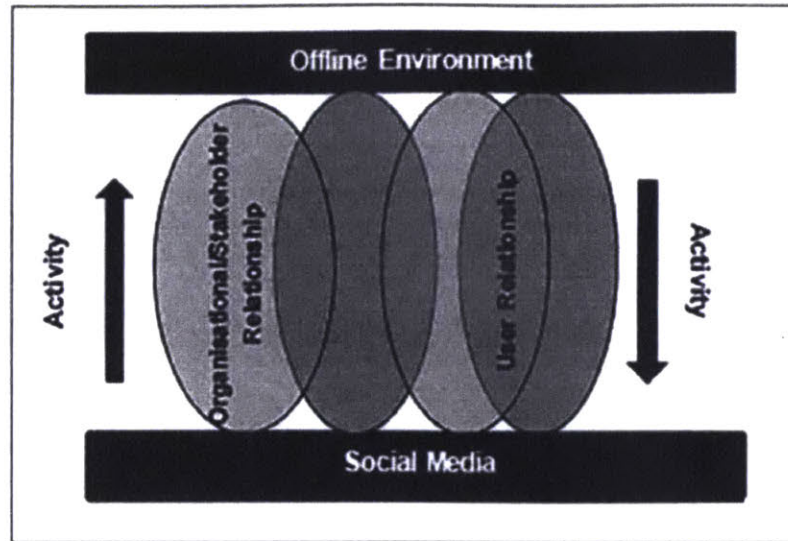


**Figure 1.** Propinquital loop.

She suggests that, instead of thinking of the process as a series of random events, it's important to think of it as one loop. This idea fits in the gamified notion of the IBC as a structured story. To complete the game one has to finish the story so that the process keeps moving. The loop is completed when the participants returns to social media to challenge the next person. This property of the IBC is also unique because its story mechanical structure necessitates that the participant engages in each part of the process. Though not everyone gave money, (which existed outside the loop of participation) the rest of the process could not have happened without all the elements (initial challenge post, video, ice water, bucket, tipping the bucket, and return to social media) working in unison. In a way it resembles a type of multi-author TV series where each individual is a writer, producer, editor, distributor and marketer. Their social media page is the network and their friends and followers represent the marketing outreach. This type of spider webbed network makes the transmedia narrative of the ICB more personal as it flows from network to network. It suggests that incorporating offline environments into social media practice (and vice versa) creates a bridge for stakeholders to move their relationship seamlessly between the two spaces, creating one overall brand experience and increasing the potential (and opportunities) to strengthen organizational relationships.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Sutherland. 79

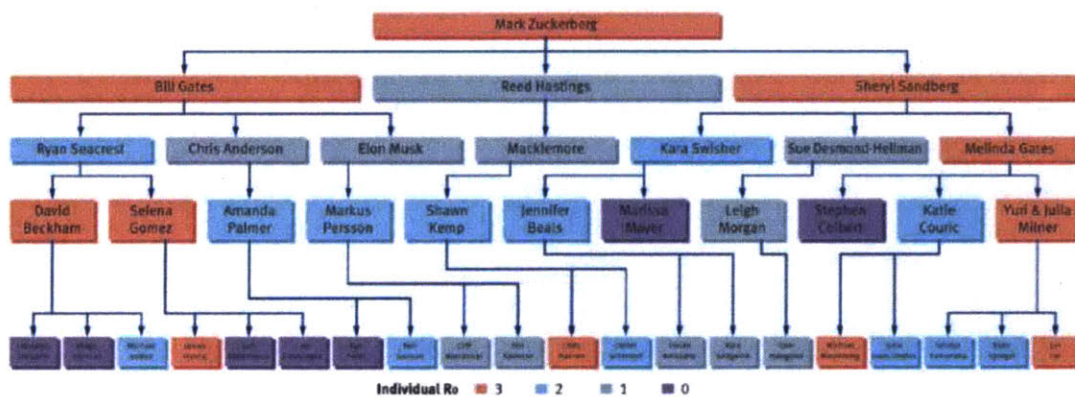
This larger network she calls a propinquital chain.



**Figure 2.** Propinquital chain.

Notice how the pattern resembles that of a TV distribution network with local channels playing nationally syndicated content. Each loop adds more and more users to the chain and starts to spin outward. As celebrities and television programs got involved, the chains became bigger and bigger. Essentially the propinquital loop allows the structured transmedia story to directly engage more people while simultaneously creating its own distribution network and raising money.

The celebrity and microcelebrity qualities of the IBC also make it unique. A study of celebrity participation yielded the following figure below.<sup>54</sup>



Tree structure of nominations associated with index case Mark Zuckerberg

<sup>54</sup> Ni et al., "Transmissibility of the Ice Bucket Challenge among Globally Influential Celebrities."

The power and influence associated with these well-known “brand” participants connects to the way individuals worked within a micro celebrity framework. In essence attention becomes a type of social currency that individuals use to build up their personal status. Marwick and Boyd (2011) conceptualize “MicroCelebrity” as a mindset and set of practices in which audience is viewed as a fan base; popularity is maintained through ongoing fan management; and self-presentation is carefully constructed to be consumed by others.<sup>55</sup>

While perhaps a novel notion in 2011, I would argue that microcelebrity is now the dominant form of engagement with social media. Twitter calls engagers “Followers” instead of friends. Facebook changed its “like” button to a multi-response emoji option to allow more accurate responses to user content . I’ve even witnessed high school bullying in which students (in the real world) spread the word for no one to “like” a person’s post. Then they screen-grab the post with few likes, post it to their social media page, and comment on how the original poster has no friends and is a loser no one cares about. I’ve also witnessed people deleting posts that don’t have enough likes for fear that it will damage their reputation. These popular culture techniques resemble industry company management in that they strive for a represented version of authenticity while curating their representation. In talking about Felicia Day’s management of her microcelebrity (before it became real celebrity) Elcessor says people "authenticate authenticity," by performing the traits that make up their star images, thus validating those traits and rewarding the audience's investment in them. The ability to control one's own star image, whether online or elsewhere, offers unique opportunities for the display of authenticity.<sup>56</sup>

To relate this back to the IBC and the propinquital loop, each participant, whether micro celebrity or real celebrity, approached the construction of their micro narrative (within the macro, structured narrative of the IBC) in a way that for them, reinforces their personal brand and provides a unique form of demonstrating authenticity. In some senses, participation in the challenge at all, or playing along with the pop culture game, was a

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<sup>55</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, “‘Not This One’: Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (July 2013): 848–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479369>.

<sup>56</sup> Elcessor, “Tweeting @feliciaday.” 50

show of authenticity. I believe the IBC was able to spread so successfully because its narrative mechanics afforded participants multiple opportunities to elevate their personal brand while simultaneously fitting into a macro narrative. This can be seen in the way people approach the challenge. Like TV producers, they would control the mis-en-scene of their post, by manipulating filmic and televisual traits. They used locations - some did challenges in the pool, on set of films, in classrooms, or in front of popular landmarks. They controlled wardrobe - male participants often did their challenge with their shirts off or many women did them in bikinis. They directed performances by playing up their nervousness by jumping up and down, or shaking before the ice water was poured, or screaming and running around in circles once they were doused with the ice. They used irony or set-ups to show character by doing the challenge in suits or full uniforms, also serving to show how brave or silly they were. They also approached the propinquital chain in a similar way. As seen in the figure above, many people challenged others they knew had large followings. I personally witnessed (and participated in) challenges where people strategically challenged their Facebook friend with the highest amount of followers or regular replies in order to build an association with that individual. In a sense, the propinquital chain allowed for a type of visualizing of popularity by association with other micro-celebrities who may have larger followers. All of these facets of the Ice Bucket Challenge ground it in the larger world of transmedia text creation while allowing it to enhance the genre through the unique incorporation of the propinquital loop.

### **Subverting the Political Economy**

The Ice Bucket Challenge further innovates in the world of transmedia by facilitating a communal social-entrepreneurial approach to creating change in the political economy. By political economy I refer to the capitalism-based pipeline of the non-profit sector that often relies on large donations from corporations, uses the images and plight of the people supposedly served by the intervention to continue raising funds, and then ultimately after years of service in the same field, there is little noticeable change. The world of social entrepreneurship is often seen as deviating from traditional capitalism by having a triple bottom line as opposed to a singular bottom line, capital. The triple bottom



line, coined by John Elkinton in 1994, is sometimes called TBL or 3BL. It is an accounting framework that attempts to shift the notion of profitability to incorporate social, environmental or ecological, as well as financial success.<sup>57</sup> This multiple perspective, sometimes referred to in my personal networks as People-Planet-Profit, can be used as a new way to understand the potential of transmedia projects like the IBC to shift power dynamics towards a greater potentiality for change. Traditionally many Neo-Marxists have criticized the Neo-Liberal thought that the Internet would provide access for all. One of those criticisms frames a connection between the digital economy and what Italian autonomists call the “social factory.” Terranova articulates this in her piece *Free Labor, Producing Culture for the Digital Economy*. She says, the “social factory” describes a process whereby “work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine.”<sup>58</sup> To her, the free labor of the digital economy represents a type of exploitation of the users who voluntarily participate. She acknowledges this duality when she says, “Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labor on the Net includes the activity of building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces on MUDs and MOOs.”<sup>59</sup> According to this perspective, the exchange of profit and cost is framed by a traditional capitalist notion and doesn’t acknowledge the multifaceted value exchange of a triple bottom line. She acknowledges the argument that the digital economy represents a new type of gift economy, but she regular comes back to articulating the value exchange with the focus or priority going to the capitalist qualities. She says, “It is important to remember that the gift economy, as part of a larger digital economy, is itself an important force within the reproduction of the labor force in late capitalism as a whole. The provision of “free labor,” ... is a fundamental moment in the creation of value in the digital economies.”<sup>60</sup>

I would argue that the creation of value mentioned here needs to be understood through a triple lens as it relates to the IBC. There is personal value for the players of the

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<sup>57</sup> John Elkington and Pamela Hartigan, *The Power of Unreasonable People: How Social Entrepreneurs Create Markets That Change the World* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, c2008., 2008).

<sup>58</sup> Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text*, 2000, <https://doi.org/{}{}{}>. 33

<sup>59</sup> Terranova. 33

<sup>60</sup> Terranova. 36

game/participants in the narrative, there is traditional financial value of the for profit social media entities like Facebook and Twitter that sell ads based on increased users, and finally there is the money and attention generated for ALS which ultimately led to a scientific breakthrough. In a sense one could argue that in these instances YouTube and Facebook facilitate a triple bottom line through the labor economy of its users. There is a value capture by the platform as Terranova also argues, but that does not negate the power of the user. This lens gives agency to the participants in a way that both acknowledges their participation in a larger capitalist model, but also the value they received by participating in a larger cultural activity. Other criticisms of digital phenomena like the IBC suggest that citizens should be responsible for government duties. Ouellette and Hay speak to this. In criticizing industry self-help programs they say, “it has also adopted an active and visible role in coordinating non-state resources (money, expertise, outreach) for achieving the ethic of self-sufficient citizenship promoted by neoliberal regimes.”<sup>61</sup> This argument assumes that there was a “Heyday” when the government actually took care of the needs of all its citizens. It frames the “enterprising self” as somehow a new concept that allows the government to offload its responsibilities. I would argue that people of color, underserved or specifically threatened communities have always had to be self-enterprising. This was seen in the way the Black Panther movement created free breakfast programs or policed their own neighborhoods. I think the social entrepreneurial approach to a lack of care or social service is to invent or discover structures that enable self-care in instances where the government has historically failed to do its job. Many organizations like the Black Panther Party create successful programs that are then co-opted or massified by State or Federal government agencies, and sometimes lose their nuanced value. In another sense, this same co-opting can be seen as an indirect delivery mechanism to get an innovative idea/practice/program out to the masses.

I would also argue that this sentiment Ouellette and Hay articulate is rooted in western, White, Judeo-Christian thought and doesn’t acknowledge many eastern trends that have existed for centuries. A Waqf in Islamic tradition is a type of trust, often a

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<sup>61</sup> Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, “Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen,” *Continuum* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2008): 474, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310801982930>.

donation of land, that can be farmed or worked and the profits can be allocated to charity or used to support the individual who donated.<sup>62</sup> The most famous example is an old farmer who became too weak to work his land so he donated it to a charity for the homeless. They worked the land and lived there and he kept twenty percent of the profits to live. Equating new financial models in the digital economy to neo-liberal inventions is a type of White-washing of business practices that don't acknowledge the power of the internet to facilitate a type of global "best-practices" which might actually refer back to existing phenomena created by people of color or marginalized communities as opposed to neo-liberal invention. This is not to say there are not instances where the larger financial profits go back to the platform. Ouellette and Hays go on to say, "Under neoliberalism, civic well-being is increasingly both commodified (produced for profit) and tied to entrepreneurial imperatives, while 'lifestyle maximization' is joined to (and often supersedes) the nation and electoral politics as the domain through which citizenship is tested and achieved."<sup>63</sup> Again this removes agency from the innovators of social entrepreneurial solutions to serve the underserved and suggest a type of government dependency as the norm.

I argue that the Ice Bucket Challenge represents an example of taking an Eastern philosophy or business practice and updating it using new media and technology. Through its unique story and structural mechanics the Ice Bucket Challenge accomplishes this type of digital updating by providing participants with a fun, engaging and personally beneficial project that fits more into western models than its original inception may have without the digital accompaniment. I argue these types of projects are ignored by many critiques of the internet's ability to subvert the digital economy. Another way the Ice Bucket Challenge deviates from these criticisms is by operating within an attention economy that can continue to serve activists and micro-celebrities by creating networks they can exploit long after their participation in the initial project is complete. As Zeynep Tufekci describes in *'Not This One': Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism*, networked microcelebrity

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<sup>62</sup> Aznan Hasan and Syahnaz Sulaiman, "The Use of Islamic Real Estate Investment Trust (I-REITs) as a Contemporary Instrument in Developing Waqf Assets: Potential Structure, Issues and Challenges," *Intellectual Discourse* 24 (July 2, 2016): 521–522.

<sup>63</sup> Ouellette and Hay, "Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen." 474

activism refers to politically motivated non-institutional actors who use affordances of social media to engage in presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism.<sup>64</sup> While not everyone participating in the IBC would consider themselves an ALS activist, the larger structural framework for the narrative did enable them to temporarily occupy the position of activist status through their participation and they were able to use this status as a form of building their authentic brand. This is seen in thousands of the videos where personal testimonies were given, other causes promoted or personal projects highlighted while doing the challenge. The previous examples of people doing the IBC on movie sets, while on political campaigns, and on location at schools or businesses support this notion. This also has offline potential as well. Their attention-commanding ability is based on status, as practiced within and through participatory media but not limited to it, rather than institutional affiliation or membership in political parties in the traditional sense.<sup>65</sup> So the triple bottom line exchange of IBC participation doesn't end at the IBC, but rather enables and promotes a larger trend of social activism that can spiral out from the networked micro-celebrity.

I saw this personally with the Ice Bucket Challenge I participated in. The Executive Director of a film festival was challenged by a “non-industry” friend. He then challenged two other Executive Directors of large nonprofits in the area. One of them was new to the position and, prior to the IBC, their relationship had been strictly transactional. However, after the former dumped the bucket of ice on the latter (filmed on location outside a sign advertising their institution) a deeper partnership emerged between the organizations with the shared viewership of their video as a conversation starter for their colleagues. Because they were both non-profit art institutions, the publicity was highly valued.

This ‘attention capital’ is an additional advantage of networked micro-celebrity. Part of the reasoning behind the 3000% growth of the ALS foundations donations could be attributed to this. Attention is a key resource for social movements. It is the means through which a social movement can introduce and fight for their preferred framing,

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<sup>64</sup> Tufekci, “Not This One.” 840

<sup>65</sup> Tufekci. 852

convince broader publics of their cause, recruit new members, attempt to neutralize opposition framing, access solidarity, and mobilize their own constituents.<sup>66</sup>

The IBC took all of these factors to the 5th Dimension, shrinking space and time, for the ALS foundation. Though it previously operated in the traditional U.S. non-profit structure, its ability to raise awareness, gain viewership and get donations was limited by its functional capacity. What the IBC did was take its existing framework, put it through the 5th Dimensional qualities (mass-media + individual media + civic + financial = real world change) and create dynamic results that led to a scientific breakthrough. Tufekci uses this same argument to explain the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring. Micro celebrity networks were leveraged between activists to coordinate protests, connect to mainstream journalists, and eventually overthrow governmental regimes. One could argue that their time spent tweeting, blogging, posting, sharing, IM'ing was a type of free labor, but the evidence of the potential of networked communities through social media was made clear for the world to see. In this way, the IBC and other transmedia phenomena can be seen to dynamically shift the conversation around the digital economy and the potential for new relationships to labor. This isn't to say that every viral phenomenon is inherently empowering, but I do argue that viral qualities of the digital economy illustrate a much larger, yet to be seen, potential.

## Conclusion

The Ice Bucket Challenge was initially dismissed by many as yet another form of "Slacktivism." My goal with this paper is to show how the IBC is so much more because it both fits into a framework of transmedia text but also represents a key deviation. In the same way that the IBC exists as an evolution from analog models of fundraising, I believe we will soon see divergent strategies developed off of the Ice Bucket Challenge. I believe this is what Lev Manovich was referring to in *Language of New Media* to understand the ways that new media infrastructure provides opportunities, if connected to the right distribution structures. In his chapter, Digital Humanities, Manovich says, "To design new structures of argumentation is an entirely different activity than to form argumentation within existing structures that have been codified and variously

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<sup>66</sup> Tufekci. 849

naturalized.”<sup>67</sup> Thus the final result of this new process is a new structure or lifeform that is a hybrid of many things that ultimately serve to subvert the political economy because it is able to navigate and exist in an environment that no other previous lifeform could. The Ice Bucket Challenge occupies such a form and its impact will only be fully known once the other structures that deviate from its formation can be properly analyzed and studied as the far ends of the tangential growth potential for micro-celebrity, structured storytelling, and crowd-sourced civic engagement. Instead of ending with a summation, I think it more appropriate to end with a few questions: What if the Ice Bucket Challenge happened every year? What if it became its own organization and raised money for multiple causes? What if the Ice Bucket Challenge was an app? What if it was turned into some type of purchasable game? What if there was a subscription service that instrumentalized structured storytelling with new content challenges non-profits could initiate? What could the world look like if all the participants regularly participated in that same level of civic engagement every eight weeks?

*END*

This artifact represents my initial exploration into trying to understand how the mechanics of transmedia structures could be related to time/space phenomenon. This 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension as a bi-product of propinquital loops was fascinating to me. Thinking back to the dump truck, I started to think of the ingenuity of the tiny pieces of any intervention structure and how, if arranged appropriately, they could take a system that was large and slow and required hundreds of people to operate could be replaced by a powerful combination of mechanics. This also marked the beginning of thinking about a text as a combination of storytelling elements and civic elements that could play out over a long period of time. I begin to wonder what would an Ice Bucket Challenge version of an ongoing youth program look like? And moreover how would I take steps to design it.

DA# 10 Be Prepared

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<sup>67</sup> Gunnar Liestøl, Andrew Morrison, and Terje Rasmussen, *Digital Media Revisited: Theoretical and Conceptual Innovations in Digital Domains* (MIT Press, 2004). 257

INT. VR DANCE NUMBER 3

After finishing the dance number there may be small conversation for 5 minutes. After it wraps, Sultan steps on the stage again.

SULTAN

That was a bit heavy. Sorry for getting super emotional so soon. For the next number I want to show the ability of the Realisistance tool to merge narratives of decoding (from Stuart Hall) and what Henry Jenkins calls civic imagination.

He points to Henry in the audience.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

One thing almost any Black man knows is that feeling that people are afraid of you for just being in your own skin. You develop a sixth sense for getting followed in a store or when people see you and remember to lock their car, or women move their purse to the other side when you cross the street. Sometimes you steal stuff just to spite people cuz they think you're gonna steal anyway.

He pauses and laughs to the crowd.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

It used to bug me as a nerdy Black kid cuz I never felt as tough as I was supposed to. I talked "too white" for the Black kids, I was too Muslim for the Black Christian kids, too Black for the Arab Muslim kids, Too poor for the wealthy kids in the burbs and too proper for the hood kids. I just couldn't win.

(MORE)

SULTAN (CONT'D)

So if strangers were afraid of you it was frustrating, because I used to feel like, if you really knew who I was, if you really understood all that had gone into me, you'd realized that you've been afraid of the wrong thing.

He pauses and chuckles to himself.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

It's also how I felt with the way they taught Black History month. It felt backwards in a kind of way. Or watered down. Dr. West once called it the Santa Clausation of Malcolm X and MLK.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

There's this idea of anyone doing social impact work as being this tree hugging hippie with no teeth. I think it's connected to some toxic, probably historically White Imperialistic, notion of Masculinity. If you could cut it you'd be making a bunch of money, right.

He laughs to the crowd.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

We read James Baldwin in professor Hendershot's class. At one point he says, White people forget that you always see them. They don't always see you but you've been watching them your whole life. But according to my DNA results, we are also them. So perhaps, in some weirdly poetic justice from the universe, in slavery and rape The Man actually equipped you with some imperialistic instincts that you can use to take The Man down. But from within yourself.



Napoleon Hologram comes down and looks at you.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

So this number is for all the social justice warriors out there who wage love with tenacity and as much teeth as can be imagined. I'll be playing the odds of my existence to be standing here tonight.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

For this number I need the help of my cousin. This is a reinterpretation of Be Prepared from the original Lion King.

A young teen comes up. The music from Be Prepared comes up. The teen lip syncs as images fly around in the same hollow cubes of the Realizistance tool.

TEEN

I know that your powers of retention are a whet as a warthog's backside.

Box 1: There were X slaves in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Only X percent survived. Odds = \_\_\_\_\_ Images of Napoleon, Henry VIII, Dutch Slave traders, Images of auctions, Slave ship manifests and proposals pop up. The teen looks from them to the people like "are you that stupid?" His movements are mimicked by the hologram of the Napoleonic hologram.

TEEN (CONT'D)

But thick as you are, pay attention. My words are a matter of pride.

Only 1 in \_\_\_\_\_ slaves made it to freedom. Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglas pop up. They are opposite the white leaders of the time. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton.

TEEN (CONT'D)

It's clear from your vacant expression, the lights are not all on upstairs.

Confederate flags, rallies, Birth of a Nation (original) images, burnt down south pop up. Civil war headline with Black soldiers on "unawares". Odds of Blacks that survived the civil war.

TEEN (CONT'D)

But we're talking kings and successions,  
even you can't be caught unawares.

Odds of Blacks that got 40 Acres and a Mule headline. Marcus Garvey, Fard Muhammad, W. E. B. Dubois at Harvard. Black woman writer. George Washington Carver. Black inventor of street lights.

TEEN (CONT'D)

So prepare for the chance of a lifetime. Be  
prepared for sensational news.

Odds of a black person going to college in 1900. We see many of the first Black's admitted to college. Early civil rights activity. First Black Mayor. First Black Millionaire. Virginia rebellion.

TEEN (CONT'D)

A shiny new era is tip toeing nearer.

He tip toes past angry White mobs to a dummy of Trump. His mouth moves like a puppet. Integration odds.

TRUMP DUMMY

And where do we feature?

TEEN

Just listen to teacher.

He rounds on the crowd with fury in his eyes. Behind him images of the civil rights movement seem to grow exponentially. Odds of educated Blacks increasing.

TEEN (CONT'D)

I know it sounds sordid, but you'll be  
rewarded when at last I am given my dues.

Civil rights victories, Little Rock 9, Brown vs Board.

## TEEN (CONT'D)

And injustice deliciously squared. Be prepared.

Death of King, Malcolm, Black panthers. Odds of Black movement leaders killed.

He puts on a mask of A group of young Black Men come marching in. They are all wearing presidents masks with Ivy league sweaters on and others with Facebook, Google, Amazon, Ali Baba, Uber, Air BNB. They march with a Nazi swing in their arms. Sultan comes out shepherding them. Dan Williams Dances around them. Odds of Black boys finishing middle school.

## GROUP

It's great that we'll soon be connected.  
With a King who'll be all time ordered.

## SULTAN

Of course, quid pro quo your expected to take certain duties on board.

More first blacks: Astronaught, professors, Oscars, Nobel prize, Black tennis players. Tiger woods, Venus and Serena win again and again. Obama. Odds of Black boys finishing high school. 1 out of \_\_\_\_\_

## SULTAN (CONT'D)

The future is littered with prizes.

Data quotation that shows that if more Black students would graduate at the rate of Whites it would be worth 3.2 Billion dollars.

## SULTAN (CONT'D)

And though I'm the main addressee.

Odds of Black boys getting into University of Michigan. The soldiers come in close to see what he's going to say. He grabs the nearest one by the collar. Data of Black buying power. Percentage of Blacks in NFL, NBA, Baseball, pop up to Karim Abdul Jabar. Motown, Jimmy Hendricks, Nina Simone,

SULTAN (CONT'D)

You won't get a sniff without me!

graduating 4 year college 1/240. He shoves him away to images of revolt. Black lives Matter, Black Panthers. The kids start to peel their masks off slowly.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

So prepare for the coup of the century. Be prepared for the murkiest scam.

Odds of start ups that are successful. Percentage of bi-racial people or a bunch of Bi-racial people. Vanessa Williams, Obama, America will be majority Minority headlines.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

Meticulous planning,

Odds of people getting a film to Sundance. Father images. African Kings, Garvey, Dubois, Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X,, Warith deen Muhammed, Daddy.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

tenacity spanning, decades of denial

Grand dad, other ancestor pics, DNA results. Odds of getting into MIT.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

is simply why I'll be King undisputed,  
respected saluted and seen for the wonder  
I am.

Odds of Black men getting into USC. Odds of a Black man from Inkster getting a PHD at USC.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

And injustice deliciously squared. Be prepared.

PHD acceptance letter next to final odds.

### Chapter 3: Tadthakir Reflection

January 2018

The next iteration of thought would have its birth at the Sundance film festival. The film, *A Boy, A Girl, A Dream* directed by my former protégé and cousin Qasim Basir, has just screened and the Q and A had literally just wrapped. I was staying with Madeleine Plonsker who I had met when my first film, *Bilal's Stand*, had premiered at Sundance in 2010. My adopted grandmother as she calls herself is a lover of art and Chicago advocate for Cuban artists through several tours and ultimately a book published by Lake Forest press. (She also regularly reminds me that everyone needs a Jewish Grandmother). The film follows two people on election night 2016 as they discuss the plight and responsibilities of young Black professionals in regards to living a full life. So in the Q&A, I've just heard several young Black men and women on stage talking about the moment we were in and how it was now more important to come together in a fight to reach our potential. My phone rings.

It's one of the kids from Street Cred' my PBS youth project. He's called me as he's running down the street in Phoenix Arizona. Out of breath he tells me he's broke and alone on the streets with no money and nowhere to go. Back at Sundance Qasim is hugging me as he walks past with Megan Good and Omari Hardwick who I had watched for the last decade in films and TV.

It's too much.

I break down crying.

My stomach is in knots. I immediately feel like garbage. I had been feeling on top of the world because the night before I had gotten an offer that might mean *Street Cred* would finally come out nationally. But this was a youth from that same program. And while I've been gallivanting around trying to get the show finished and the VR film done, and write papers about Black youth and data and justice and connected lighting for caring cities for Phillips lighting for my lab position and showing his image in a trailer to everyone in the industry, I've become completely disconnected from the lives of the youth in the program.

I had also been feeling angst as I watched the newest round of VR films at Sundance, many of which featured Black and Brown bodies suffering in some way shape or form.

I'm crying in the middle of the aisle as the actors and everyone are exiting the room. I feel Madeline's hand on my back as I tell her what happened. Qasim's Mother Ruhy and his sister Safiyah (who later get involved with the MIT project) swoop in as well and invite me to have pancakes.

I would spend the day with them. As I get ready to leave I've completely neglected the Connecting Lighting for Caring Cities project for my Lab but there was no space in the dealing with the emotional drama of what this kid is going through and what it means for me. Every time over the next few days that I would try to sit down to do my Lab work, some other issue would arise. One part of Shafrodeen or X is acknowledging who you are and what your limitations are and making that part of the substance of what you are doing. So while X actions could be perceived as aggressive or disruptive, another way of thinking about it is understanding the distance needed to travel between two mindsets or states as an unbearable burden. The colloquium "I just can't deal with this right now" becomes almost a literal statement regarding one's ability to sustain the emotional and social pressure of existing in two disparate realities at the same time. X is a humble way of admitting that one cannot "deal" with the distance and if something has to give, it is going to be the institutional or systematic expectations.

It got to the point where it felt wrong, in the overall moment, to leave the headspace I was in sorting through the unique FBITS realities to return to prescribed work, even though I knew the repercussions could lead to me getting kicked out of MIT. In short, Sting was glowing blue and I was ready to flip up tables, while the bar man wanted order.

I arrange to wire him some funds.

This feeling would stay with me through the rest of IAP as I try to resolve the financial issue I was having with housing. An administrative office had stepped in to support my move out of graduate housing. However, because I had received the maximum amount of financial aid, they couldn't transfer the funds to me. Because of this

I would not be able to register for classes until the hold was removed. I fell into a 3 week back and forth with the same individual from the financial aid office and the intervening office (which is literally 5 doors down the hall). I went into the financial aid office on four occasions and was told repeatedly “there’s nothing we can do.” If I had accepted this, I would not be able to register for classes even though the intervening office was trying to pay my old balance to release the hold.

This experience, or Data Reality, specifically the attitudes of the individuals in the SFS office would ultimately reshape my overall impression of MIT. The attitude of “there’s nothing we can do” is articulated in my film *Bilal’s Stand* in a scene with a college financial counselor. I used the term “Naysayers” to refer to a type of attitude or position of institutional nihilism. From this perspective, the system is a standard and no level of creative thought or intervention can change a prescribed outcome. Nihilist Naysayers are a staple antagonist to the Shafrodeen perspective.

Once the semester started I begin a class focused on innovation. I started to notice another pattern that whenever race or class were brought up as factors in the discussion they were often patronized away with phrases like “of course diversity is important.” And the individual pointing them out would experience social exclusion for interjection. It became a new way of understand DA#4.

In a business class one (a red square) might propose a scenario and try to take the conversation down their perspective that continued with it the zig zags and detours created by their experience in green systems. But even in the conversation, the green privilege would pull the conversation back to its comfort zone, or area of expertise, and in doing so alienate red as it tried to stay true to its focus or course.



I begin to have FBITS moments on a daily basis and, out of exhaustion from trying to pull conversations and individuals down detours they had no interest in exploring, one starts to give up or ignore the instincts created by the Shafrodeen

perspective because they no longer serve the goal of succeeding socially, emotionally, and professionally in the space.

As I started work in my new lab, I begin to see this even more. I was doing a report on race and class diversity of VR producers and the more I dug, the more I found Black Holes of Data that prevented anyone from developing an accurate picture of the VR marketplace. It was a new type of experience like that from the syllabi only instead of all White men, there were privileged Black, Brown, and White women and Queer voices leading most of the social VR. Upon looking deeper at the funders I noticed that almost all of these projects were founded by non-profit foundations. Here I begin to see another picture. It was because of the sources of their funding, and the hidden processes of getting funding including grant applications, RFP's, funding cycles, Publicity photos, and delivery dates that these projects were told with a particular perspective. This perspective carried with it the perspective of the non-profit world to appeal to White dollars by showing Black and Brown bodies suffering. It was another type of DA#5.



I became more focused on what rules were shaping our conversation (and the rules for the media we used to create the media that shaped the conversation). I heard Marshall MacLuhan's *"The Medium is the Message"* everywhere: The RFP, the grant itself, the excel doc with the budget to get the grant, the FAFSA to determine who is in the room, etc. It started to tell a story to me that I saw reflected in the type of work that was created in academia and the VR world and this work would then inform the conversations on class, race, and privilege.

I asked, "what message is this institution sending about how these issues connect to the things we were discussing in class?" It begin to feel like a type of double-speak or pretense. Race, class, gender equality, and other forms of social justice were, on paper, said to be supported, but as one navigated the space it seemed everywhere one looked, there was another violation of the principles said to be priority.



March 2018

While at an event with a class someone mentions El Hajj Malik Shabazz and his letter he'd written saying he had changed his perspective.

Someone asks, "Who is that?"

Wait.

We had read James Baldwin in class a few weeks before, but folks hadn't heard of El Hajj Malik Shabazz and the letter he wrote coming back from Hajj? Then we haven't read James Baldwin. It's as if the world splits into two and spins around to mirror itself.

We've read James Baldwin, and discussed it for 30 minutes (before moving on to the next thing in order to stick to the schedule). So if that is put into conversation with the masses of images from in the fall syllabi, we start to get a different picture.

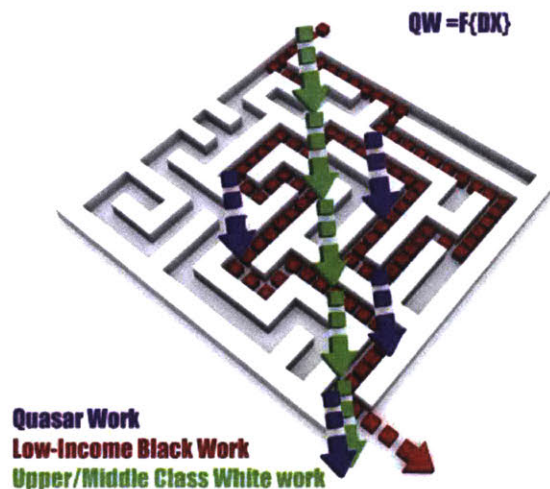
James Baldwin says in *I am not your Negro*: I'm always watching you. You never have to watch me but I've been watching you my whole life.

It hit me like a wave, all of it. It came crashing down and swirling around into one poignant Blue shining light of Sting.

In a sense I see myself in my situation for the first time. I see the path ahead of me and what I should do. But at every conflict of this experience, the student is expected take the prescribed detour and follow the prescribed path.

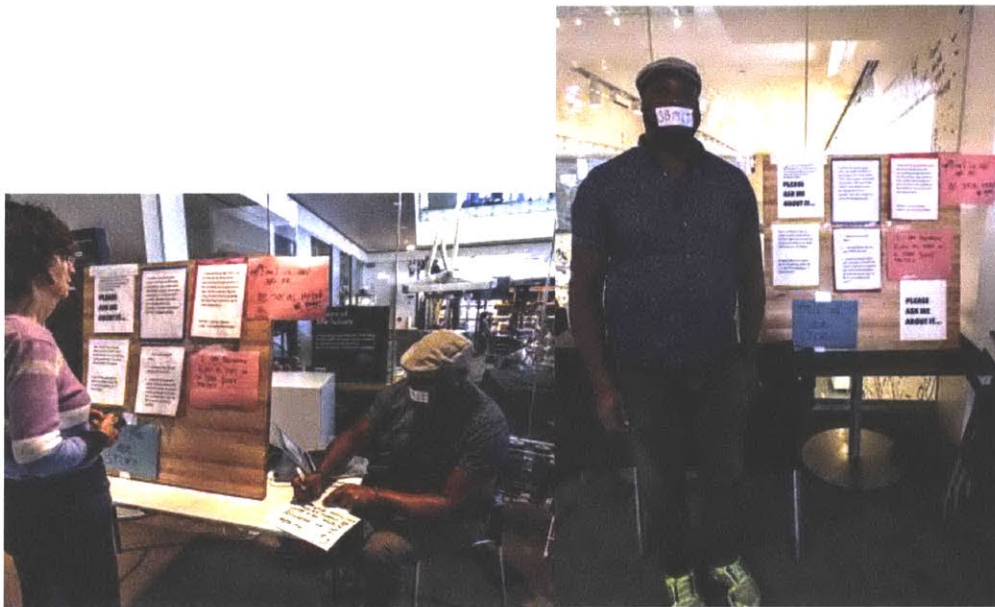
And in a moment of Shafrodeen, I said no. I instituted X. I would throw the tables against the doors and barricade ourselves in collectively. [W11](#)

The night after the incident I watched *I Am Not Your Negro* again to think about what I was feeling and how it was connected to the very essence of how I got my name from Mack X III aka my father. Would I be honoring them if I continued to swallow one thing after another while it dulled my senses with each gulp? I reflected on the timeline



between Malcom X's assassination and the experiences I was having now. What had happened from the innovation of the Nation of Islam and all the grandeur I had heard about growing up (there were independent food distribution systems, a credit union, and even several restaurant chains that funded the movement). I thought about the thirteen year old me, hungry and smelling like oatmeal, was I honoring him and his experience?

The next day I set up a tent in the lobby of the Media Lab in protest of the way the navigational politics of the space were affecting my ability to persist in my goals.



I called it a “Prototest” as I was trying to rapidly go from the days of the civil rights protests to prototyping some new intervention (what would later become HIPE and the Quasar Lab).

I was creating a space to talk about race and class in the building where it so often went ignored. For two weeks I held my own “office hours” where people could come up to me and discuss what I had been experiencing at MIT or they could tell me about their experiences. It quickly shifted to become a local conversation about how MIT’s culture was causing me to give up hope on the interventions I had come here to design.

I took several pieces of furniture and robots on display from around the lab and built a robot. I put the caption, “When MIT cares more about giving Google a voice than giving voice to lower income Black-men.” I typed up a script and then used a text to speech converter to make it read in Siri’s voice. I then looped the video so that everyone

who walked by could listen to the robot talk about its experiences. The script read as follows.

## Prologue

This is an iterative design protest. I am using a Participatory Action Research model for my protest. I am myself rapidly prototyping. For this is not about me, it's about all the me's that are not here.

I have stopped going to class because I felt the more I participated in the way MIT was designed for us as students to participate, the more I was stopping to truly believe that real change is possible. The more that I saw inside the MIT system and its culture, inside the way many of our young minds are molded to fit the mainstream system, the less hope I had for young Black men. And like Frodo with the Ring, I feel I cannot afford to give up.

I'm not saying MIT is Mount Doom.

MIT is the journey

And I have hit a roadblock

Because I saw down the path that was laid out before me and I didn't want that. And I can tell from the instincts I have from the previous places I've been that that will not get me where I want to go. Like Neo in the Matrix, I'd rather the Red Pill.

I will stop the protest when I've found something (a program, a commitment from MIT, or even connection to the right people) that helps me to feel I am on a journey I can believe in. I apologize if I've alienated you because you are not familiar with the Lord of The Rings narrative or the Matrix. I am really just a Blerd (that is a Black Nerd).

Where I grew up in Detroit, there was nothing to believe in around me so I found hope in the narrative of Frodo, or a Pearl Jam song, or even a Disney Movie. I thought maybe if characters like Frodo could make it, maybe I had a chance. I told myself, the other kids needed me to keep believing. My father converted to Islam under Malcolm X and he would say Malcolm and Martin are waiting on you to finish their work. It's weird, I know, to blend a Frodo Baggins narrative with Malcom X. Perhaps it's what Stuart Hall calls "Decoding." That's what happens when you will take hope anywhere you can get it.

Call me naive, or crazy. Perhaps I am. As Naruto Uzumaki would say, "This is my Ninja way."

I do apologize if my approach has disrupted your day, occupied your time, or been a distraction from anyone's work or learning. While disruption is my intention, hurting anyone or alienating anyone is not what I'm trying to do. I am just tired of being surrounded by an environment that feels like real change is so far away. Or feeling that I'm foolish for believing that we can do better collectively. I think we're actually really

close. We just need to make time for one another. Make space for one another. And realize that our struggles share common roots so our solutions can share common routes.

In retrospect, more than I was challenging the system to change its policies immediately, I was challenging myself to stand in discomfort and to choose that thirteen year old kid and the truth of his experiences over the ease of navigation I could choose at the institute. This also led to several new relationships, including finding my thesis advisor Ceasar McDowell and meeting other students, faculty, and staff who would become some of my best friends at the institute.

It also set me down a instructional hacking trajectory that would put me into direct contact with several Deans, retired department heads, alumni from all over the world, and eventually force me to come up with my own funding structure to support the type of work I wanted to do by bringing the Street Cred program back into primary focus.

Ultimately the experience was liberating. It set me on a trajectory that, while filled with drama of the many responses to what I was trying to do, it caused me to stay in a state of constant reflection, constant questioning, and constant prototyping.

## Chapter 3: Getting HIPE with Human Centered Design

In this chapter I will review different design approaches I considered in my journey. The goal here is not to do a deep dive comparison of the various design strategies out there, but rather to share how, in pursuing these design strategies, I began to lose faith that they were comprehensive enough in their current articulation to accomplish what I was pursuing. This loss of faith ultimately led to a new quest in which I took elements of these design approaches and then made them more specific. From that vantage point, one could argue that I am still using the design principles, with various additions to the approach.

I initially thought I found an answer to my quest for an experiential approach in the process of Human Centered Design. Human centered design is designing for and with people. It is an approach that keeps humans at the center of the design process to design technology for humans, rather than humans for technology. (Ideo HCD Toolkit)<sup>68</sup> I found this approach highly inviting, but the more I looked, I started to notice another pattern. The approach goes on to say “Human-centered design is all about building a deep empathy with the people you’re designing for; generating tons of ideas; building a bunch of prototypes; sharing what you’ve made with the people you’re designing for; and eventually putting your innovative new solution out in the world.” -Ideo<sup>69</sup>. On the surface this looked great. But I found that the notion of the designer as an individual human was lost in the process.

As I delved further into the process and used it for the youth intervention I was developing, then called *Street Cred: When It All Changed*, I found it lacking in personal support. What were the terms of engagement in “designing for and with” people? How was your whole self acknowledging their whole selves? As a large Black man I found myself uncomfortable when operating amongst the other designers. There were no

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<sup>68</sup> Ideo, the Human Centered Design “Design Kit.”

<sup>69</sup> “Design Kit.” <https://www.ideo.com/post/design-kit>

particular incidents, however it became clear in the subtle, nuanced way that it does, that I was probably one of the first large Black men most of the other designers on our team encountered. Outside of the social implications of this awkwardness, it created a new challenge to fully getting behind the HCD approach. If a team of designers is put together to design “for and with” people and to “build deep empathy” with people but that deep empathy is not built for the team (i.e. there are no structures in place to build deep empathy for the team like ice-breakers, group activities, conversations about our own biases coming together, conversations about the biases in the spaces in which we operate, acknowledgment of different levels of privilege on the team, acknowledging the way discomfort around race might be playing out on the team, etc) then how could we as a team create deep empathy for a community for which we are designing if we have done nothing to create deep empathy for each other? Moreover if we are not sensitive to the discomfort of our team members in terms of the time we give to learning about their working styles or communication styles or learning (dis)abilities, then are we actually showing deep empathy for the community we are building by giving them an inefficient team? If the mental health or well being of the design team is not put in conversation with the mental health or well being of the community and the socio-political state of the community, then from where is this skill to be empathetic supposed to emerge?

Another team member and I joked that HCD was a lot of miserable people making miserable things that would ultimately make people miserable. There is a large body of work criticizing the HCD approach. However, for now, that will be a Wormhole X for future exploration. Ultimately the lack of focus on the humans that are the designers in the Human Centered Design approach led to the realization that the quest must continue with a different approach. We see the arrival in DA #10. It is called HIIPE.

## **Getting HIIPE; A New Sufi Design Paradigm**

In order to disrupt the development pattern of HCD, and create design structures that could break the mode and lead to long lasting, sustainable disruption mechanisms, they must be made in a different way. This new “way” cannot be simply limited to the “edges” of design as they are traditionally imagined, for that construction also comes with it the

cultural heritage of a White capitalist patriarchal (WCP) world. Instead it goes beyond the design, the design environment, and grows to push at the edges of the way we conceive “designer.” So how can a “designer” design something that is both stable enough to grow, get necessary resources, inspire faith, and appease investor chains while simultaneously constantly shifting, listening, and growing organically?

To answer this, I present a new design methodology rooted in eastern, Sufi, tradition. I call this design methodology HIIPE. It stands for Holistic, Instinct-Driven, Intuitive Project Evolution. In this chapter, through a series of Islamic texts and their analysis, we explore the ways in which Islamic tradition and belief systems can pivot the positionality of the designer and, in doing so, change the trajectory of design structures.

## **(W)Holistic – Design and “Designer” in relationship**

The notion of holistic, as used in HIIPE, plays with the question of what makes one whole. It acknowledges the person in the position of “designer” and puts that in relationship to the thing being designed. It also puts them in relationship to communities. Historically a separation is made between the designer’s identity and personal life and the thing they are designing. Feminist standpoint theory has set a foundation for understanding this in the western context. It makes three broad claims:<sup>70</sup>

- 1) Knowledge is socially situated.
- 2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized.
- 3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized.

In addition to this focus on moving the marginalized perspective to the center of the focal point, it also suggests there are other ways to conceptualize the very nature of how we think of research or design. This is also true in Islam where the moral reputation of a scholar is connected to the validity of their proofs. In a more modern context, removing the social, racial, class, gender, and body politics of the designer carries with it a WPC

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<sup>70</sup> “Feminist Standpoint Theory | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.”

framework which historically assumed that all the designers were White men. So one's family name, or college, or school of thought was used to distinguish the perspective of the designer because those other physical and cultural traits were assumed to be the same.

HIPE challenges this notion by not only bringing the whole individual within the structure of design but it also asserts that there should be a built-in parallel journey of self discovery, or if you will, "self-design" that mirrors the external design. While the proofs of this will be through analyzing Muslim texts, these concepts appear in many other eastern philosophies.

This is perhaps unique to a Muslim philosophy. In the Quran it says, "God does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in their hearts." (Quran Ch 11, Verse 13).<sup>71</sup> This core starting principle both differentiates the HIPE methodology from many design paradigms but it also puts it in relation to a spiritual or personal development philosophy which is inseparable from the design of the thing being made. Here we will further complicate the notion of "designer" by exploring additional Islamic traditions of textual design.

To clarify, HIPE is not suggesting that every individual take a Muslim approach to their work. But rather the individual should determine their own personal, spiritual, or professional values that will guide their personal development. This could range from Tony Robbins' motivational speaking, to Marie Kondo's *Does This Bring Me Joy?*, to Tim Ferris' *Four Hour Work Week* to Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. Whatever philosophy one chooses as a guiding principle, it should be followed throughout the design process. For me, I chose to explore Islamic traditions for this first iteration of HIPE.

In Muslim tradition, not only do we follow what is written in the Quran, we also follow what are called the "Hadith", a saying of the prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him -PBUH). These are usually quoted with the person who heard it and the person who related it. If the character of either was ever in question, the Hadith is said to be a "weak Hadith" One of the "strong Hadith" and most quoted in social justice circles reads as follows: Abu al-'Abbas 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas(ra) reports:

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<sup>71</sup> Noble, "The Meaning of The Holy Qur'an / Edition 10|Other Format."



One day I was riding (a horse/camel) behind the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, when he said, ‘Young man, I will teach you some words. Be mindful of God, and He will take care of you. Be mindful of Him, and you shall find Him at your side. If you ask, ask of God. If you need help, seek it from God. Know that if the whole world were to gather together in order to help you, they would not be able to help you except if God had written so. And if the whole world were to gather together in order to harm you, they would not harm you except if God had written so. The pens have been lifted, and the pages have dried.

■ Related by Tirmidhi (An-Nawawi).<sup>72</sup>

I often replace the word God with “Universe” (especially for the last three sentences) and it gives it a somewhat looser, more easily digestible/tangible interpretation for the modern designer. Both the notions of *God* or *Universe* create a paradigm that takes the individual, as the “Designer” or “Creator” out of that articulation of position and, instead, deposits him/her/them as a secondary force in the development or creation of any product. It gives agency to the thing being designed, and shifts the designer over into an adjacent position of curator or what I refer to as the “Designer/Gardener” position. The Designer/Gardener is more accurate in the sense that even a master gardener cannot ever ultimately control what grows or when a flower will bloom, but instead they can use their skills and experience to guide what they are developing towards a healthy growth pattern and that flower will bloom when it has achieved all the necessary requirements of blooming.

This secondary positionality also minimizes the doubts of what ‘*should have*’ or ‘*would have*’: Happened; Worked; Yielded money; Been completed sooner; Led to a particular opportunity or outcome; Looked like one imagined it would; etc. It also opens one up to the possibility that, any new person, any new idea that the Universe brings about might be exactly what the project needed to move forward. There is a verse in the Quran that also supports this, it says, ““O you who believe! Be not like those who disbelieve (hypocrites) and who say to their brethren when they travel

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<sup>72</sup> “Hadith 19 || Be Mindful of Allah and Allah Will Protect You.”

through the earth or go out to fight: ‘If they had stayed with us, they would not have died or been killed,’ so that God may make it a cause of regret in their hearts”  
(Quran Ch.3:156)<sup>73</sup>

This is what the Prophet (PBUH) forbade in another Hadith when he said, *Strive for that which will benefit you, seek the help of God, and do not feel helpless. If anything befalls you, do not say, “if only I had done such and such” rather say “Qaddara Allahu wa ma sha’a fa’ala (God has decreed and whatever he wills, He does).” For (saying) ‘If opens (the door) to the deeds of Evil. [Ibn Majah]*<sup>74</sup>

So here, not only should one have a level of acceptance in terms of what happens, but it can be negative to dwell on what didn’t happen or didn’t go as expected as that assumes that one was in possession of awareness of the ultimate end of an element of design. In essence, it is predicting what a stem cell should have or would have been and connecting that developmental end to one’s actions as opposed to keeping them in the context of something at a particular stage of its development.

The philosopher Buber also talks about this notion of keeping something “in relation” from a more existential perspective in his book *I and Thou*. He suggests different positions of relationship between oneself and another object.<sup>75</sup>

If the element you are designing is merely an “it” and you stand in relation to “it” as its Designer or Creator, then it should be or do whatever you want. But if that element of the project, or the project as a whole, is considered to be a Thou and something with which one is in relationship, then one listens to what that thing is “saying” and responds accordingly. To return to our Gardener metaphor, one might notice the leaves on a plant are withering. Closer observation might reveal that half of the plant might be missing sunlight based on the angle of the shade coming off a nearby building over the course of the day. So turning the plant becomes a necessary part of its successful growth. The Gardner honors the natural growth of something while listening to its “yearns” for what it wants to become.

Another Muslim tradition that inspires the definition of Holistic is the paradox of destiny vs action. A regular saying, of which the origin is debated as to its validity of a

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<sup>73</sup> Noble, “The Meaning of The Holy Qur’an / Edition 10|Other Format.”

<sup>74</sup> “Sunan Ibn Majah | Chapter: 1 | The Book of the Sunnah.”

<sup>75</sup> Buber and Kaufmann, *I and Thou*.

true Hadith, says “plan as if you will live forever but work as if you will die tomorrow”. Another source reads: “Work for the affairs of the world as if you were going to live forever but work for the Hereafter as though you will die tomorrow.” (An-Nawawi)<sup>76</sup>

Both expressions encourage the planner to be unrestricted in their notion of what is possible. If ultimate success, as mentioned in the first Hadith, is left up to the Universe, then it is best to make the grandest plan of all and hope that a miracle happens that allows it to work. The expression “hope that a miracle happens’ is even misleading in western context because it assumes that the “miracle” is out of the norm. Whereas, if framed by the Hadith earlier, anything that comes from one’s actions is in essence a miracle because it wasn’t because of you that it happened. Planting a seed doesn’t guarantee its growth. Trying to build a building and buying all the materials, hiring all the people, and making the best blueprint plan doesn’t guarantee that the building will stand, especially if there is an earthquake or a bomb is dropped on the building. So output from one’s actions is a miracle of the Universe and the notion of control is an illusion.

Within the Muslim context, there is another incentive for big plans, (or in the second version of the quotation, working for the Hereafter). Umar Ibn Al-Khattab relates that he heard the Prophet (PBUH) say, *"Verily actions are by intentions, and for every person is what he intended. So the one whose hijrah was to God and His Messenger, then his hijrah was to God and His Messenger. And the one whose hijrah was for the world to gain from it, or a woman to marry her, then his hijrah was to what he made hijrah for."* (An-Nawawi)<sup>77</sup>

In this context Hijrah refers to those that journeyed with Muhammad (PBUH) to Mecca. The hadith is regularly used as support for the notion that we are judged by our intention and that we get the blessings for the intention we had. There are several other supporting verses and quotations that suggest individuals can get blessings from things that they sincerely intend. So one actually has an incentive for planning big with the notion that what happens is out of one’s control. By this definition, one could make a sincere plan to end homelessness and, if one actively worked on that plan and eventually failed miserably, one could get the blessings for that initial plan if the intention was

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<sup>76</sup> An-Nawawī, *An-Nawawi’s Forty Hadith*.

<sup>77</sup> “Hadith of Intention, The - SunnahOnline.Com.”

sincere. This also suggests bold action without fear of consequence or fear of failure because to make that assumption of failure or that something is not “realistic” is essentially a blasphemous notion. This is perhaps in direct opposition to the Christian saying that, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” This suggests the true value or essence of something is based on what was done and not held in relationship to what was intended.

There is a final, and perhaps the most important, Islamic anecdote that informs the definition of Holistic: “*Tie your camel.*” The original desert narrative suggests two men were on a journey and about to go to sleep. One turned to the other and told him to tie his camel. The other replied, “Everything is up to God”. The former replied, “Yes that is true, but you still need to tie your camel.” This suggests that one needs to do everything within their power to manifest an idea or bring something to fruition. At the end of the day, what happens may be out of one’s control, but we are responsible for what we do with what we are given.

This also speaks to the need to put depth of thought and research into whatever one is doing in order to ensure that whatever plan or approach is taken, it is the best possible action based on the resources available. Consider our example of the plant that wasn’t getting enough sun. It is not enough for the gardener to recognize and listen, but the gardener has to act after listening. So holistic captures several elements:

- 1) One must work on designing oneself in order to create external change
- 2) Anything is possible as success or failure is out of one’s control
- 3) State intentions then plan as if you’ll live forever but work as if you’ll die tomorrow.
- 4) Tie your camel. Do as much work as you possibly can with all resources as one’s disposal, then after that, give up the notion of control.

In the case of a flower needing more sunlight, this is simple, but in the case of a multi-year, multi-million dollar project, one could imagine how problematic this could be. How could one legitimize a decision that could cost millions of dollars, or seemingly render years of work or preparation null and void based on a feeling? How could that possibly be sustainable? The answer lies in the power of Instincts.

## Instinct-Driven

The world of Instincts is where elements of the entertainment industry actually come in useful. The business model of the entertainment industry takes the notion of an “instinct-driven” to a higher level as it pertains to the delivery of a performance or creation of a moment. It then assigns value to the consistency with which a performance or moment is created and that becomes part of an individual’s or a brand’s worth. In July 2018 LeBron James signed a four year, 153 million dollar contract (espn.com). This value is partially contingent on his popularity, but it also an assumption on consistent delivery based on past performance. Figure 19<sup>78</sup> shows every shot LeBron has ever taken. Data visualizations of this nature present a unique opportunity to quantify a qualitative notion.

Lebron’s popularity is based on consistent positive performance. Then his brand and popularity grow as he consistently performs but also supplements his popularity with Nike, Sprite, and other large contracts that make his name a household name, even to someone who doesn’t follow basketball. So what were the Lakers paying for? Yes, they are paying for his brand, but at the core, they are paying for the value of the consistency of his instincts. Physically there are several players that are taller, fitter, smarter, and better shots than

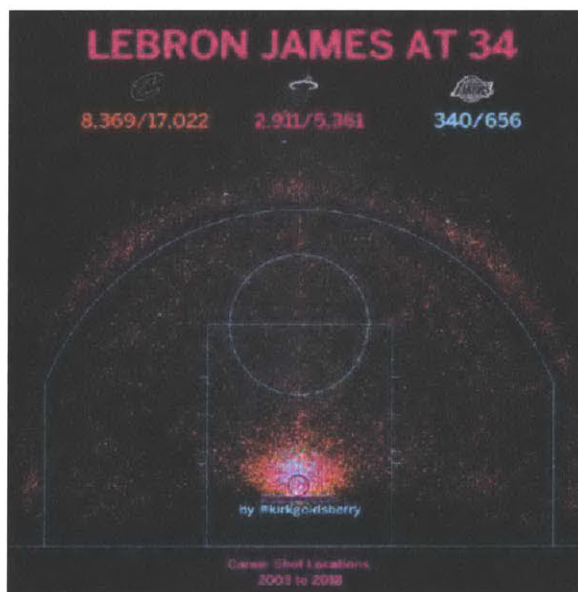


Figure 19

Lebron. But his unique ability to read what is happening live on a court and make split second decisions to consistently get a ball into a basket have become connected to his identity.

In his book, *Blink The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell dissects this notion of instincts and refers it to as “Thin Slicing.” He relates a story relayed to him by researcher Gary Klein, of a firefighter who was credited with having “ESP” after a “feeling in his gut” saved several lives. They had been battling a fire and,

<sup>78</sup> “LeBron James’ 23,039 Career Shots in One Graphic.”

after several attempts to put it out, he immediately yelled for everyone to leave. As soon as they were gone, the floor collapsed. (Gladwell 27)<sup>79</sup> Later, upon further study, they found there were several elements at play that led to his sense that the room should be abandoned, but these were rapidly processed in his brain. He had “thin sliced” all of that information and, Like Lebron, he made a decisive move of what to do based on what he felt instinctively. Gladwell says later, “being able to act intelligently and instinctively in the moment is possible only after a long and rigorous of education and experience” (259).<sup>80</sup>

So from this we can assume that someone, for example, who grew up navigating inner city/low income life, or who has spent years working in this arena, might actually experience a design paradigm like Virtual Reality differently than someone standing next to them without those experiences. The experiences can leave one with a feeling in the gut that this design approach wouldn't work for certain communities. That “gut feeling” becomes a guiding factor towards the types of questions one will ask or the things that stand out when designing something.

Within other elements of the entertainment industry, there is a whole vocabulary and established rules for the ideal environment to retain one's instincts. The work needed to sustain that ideal environment is considered an essential part of protecting a moment. Stories of diva directors or artists who only eat green M&M's or who will fight for a helicopter shot that is essential to a film have become almost cliché in the industry. This can be physical in the sense of the late Aretha Franklin, who refused to perform if there was any air conditioning and who was known to walk off stage if she felt it. This can also be as simple as sustaining an environment of concentration. A 2009 audio file of actor Christian Bale illustrates this as he yells at a lighting technician for crossing in front of his eye line while in a performance.<sup>81</sup> He screams and screams about how “unprofessional” it is to cross a method actor's eye-line which is predicated on industry understanding of the need to maintain an environment of respect of an actor's instincts. To apply this to design thought, one can argue that everything someone has experienced is always at play in the decisions they make. And the more they experience while trying

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<sup>79</sup> Gladwell, *Blink*.

<sup>80</sup> Gladwell.

<sup>81</sup> “Christian Bale: ‘I Took It Way Too Far’ - Latimes.”

to accomplish a goal, like get past defenders to get a ball in a basket, the more finely tuned those instincts become.

In institutional structures this can create inherent conflict when the steps needed to follow one's instincts are outside of the bounds of what is considered "professional" behavior. If one is also engaged in the holistic self-work we described earlier, then acting too instinctively can become problematic if the instincts which are driving behavior originated in an environment that is different than the design environment. So if Holistic refers to one's self discovery and intention, and Instinct-driven refers to both split second and long term decisions, then a necessary element to make progress is to listen to the ways in which these two things in unison are creating responses from the environment. This is where the Intuitive element becomes essential.

## **Intuitive – Close Listening at Either End**

If instincts are a reflection of the Designer/Gardner's life experience, and holistic refers to their continued journey, then the intuitive element of the design philosophy relates to the project's development in relationship to its immediate surrounding. Steven Duncombe says, "But the point is not to denude the progressive movement of its essential characteristics but to expand its possibilities, addressing a larger sector of the public by acknowledging, and working with, all the desires we possess." (17).<sup>82</sup> In this sense the thing being designed (keeping in mind "it" is a "Thou") will also communicate its own needs as one works to create "it." Its being always occupies a neutral state regardless of how "good" or "bad" the Designer/Gardner might perceive it to be. So intuitive refers more to the project's instincts than the designers' ambitions or judgments of it at any given time. It gives agency to the Project as her need for survival merges with survival of self of the Designer/Gardener and the two share a weirdly symbiotic relationship. Simone de Bouvoire talks about this in her book *Ethics of Ambiguity*. In speaking of existential existence of a thing or person she says it should be compared to a type of Husserlian reduction. She says, "And just as phenomenological reduction prevent the errors of dogmatism by suspending all affirmation concerning the mode of reality of the external

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<sup>82</sup> Duncombe, *Dream*.

world, whose flesh and bone presence the reduction does not, however contest, so existentialist conversion does not suppress my instincts, desires, plans, and passions. It merely prevents any possibility of failure by refusing to set up as absolutes the end toward which my transcendence thrusts itself, and by considering them in their connection with the freedom which projects them.” (Beauvoir, 14)<sup>83</sup>.

So if we grant our Project a “Thou” status and this is the voice of that thou, which we might grant ourselves if we are so bold, then similar to the notion of Holistic development explored earlier in the Islamic tradition, there can be no failure of the project because it will land where it is supposed to land and be what it is supposed to be. This might be in spite of the best efforts of the Designer/Gardener.

Any tortured artist knows this all too well when a project is both the “baby” for whom one would sacrifice everything and simultaneously the bane of one’s existence. The longer one plays this game the more intuitive this process becomes. Sometimes the Designer/Gardener may go all in, risking everything or burning any bridge to safety because s/he knows “this has to work, it just has to.” They are aware that might fail in the moment, but if they are consistent in decision-making, the overall process will yield the results they or the Project wants. We are in constant conversation with the Thou of our Garden. That flower will bloom as a byproduct of the process of its seed being planted, its bud being watered, its stalk receiving sunlight. At every stage of development that flower was always the flower, its final expression is merely a reflection of a conversation between the Gardener’s instincts for growing something (while working on themselves internally) and the way the flower and the Gardener responded to the environment in which it (the flower) was grown. They must listen to what is working and what is not working and consistently adjust their approach.

## **Project Evolution**

At the end of this process, or more accurately a series of processes between the flower, the Gardener, and the environment, the flower has become itself. It has evolved into its most natural state, which for most plants on earth, contains within it a genetic code

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<sup>83</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.



to create more flowers. The systems we create to articulate the value of that project, at any given state, have to be thought of in relationship to all the other elements. “Project Evolution” gives the emphasis on the project versus any one individual who might be herding it. It gives agency and suggests a “Thou” of the thing being made.

Through all the hustle to get a project to completion, natural selection blends with the Universe’s gifts (often in the form of tragic defeats) and this leads to the final product’s shape and essence more than the Designer/Gardener’s will to make it any particular thing. It is Holistic because as the would-be Designer, struggles to find and connect with their authentic self--and encourage others to do it--and capitalize on unique moments and lessons learned, the project also shifts and adjusts to grow towards its final shape. You are shaped as it shapes itself and it shapes you as you adjust to keep it alive.

The final piece here, which might have already presented itself as a question, is where does the project end? How does one know when the flower is ready to be picked versus needing a few more days of sunlight and water? When should a project be abandoned for poor design versus given more resources? The answer, in short, is never. If the goal is real and important, and the Designer/Gardener is listening to the environment, then they should keep iterating and iterating until the initial intention is met. This is reflected in another verse in the Quran. It says, “God doesn’t place a burden on anyone greater than that they have strength to bear. It gets every good that it earns and suffers every ill that it earns.” (Ch. 2 verse 286).<sup>84</sup>

This can be read in two ways. One is that we might assume burdens that are too much to handle, but they may not be our responsibility. So if one’s Project is preventing one’s personal development, then it might be that this is a burden that one has placed on oneself that is not meant to be dealt with by that individual. The other way of interpreting this goal, at least as it relates to the design of social impact initiatives, is that there is no burden that one cannot handle. If a people or group is being oppressed, it suggests that there lies some solution out there that could improve conditions.

This verse is also often understood with another series of verses that read, “Did We not expand for you your breast? And We removed from you your burden, Which had weighed upon your back, And raised high for you your repute. For indeed, with hardship

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<sup>84</sup> Noble, “The Meaning of The Holy Qur’an / Edition 10|Other Format.”

[will be] ease. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. So when you have finished [your duties], then stand up, And to your Lord direct [your] longing. (Ch. 94; verses 1-8).

Again if we replace “God” and “Lord” in the traditional understanding and instead think of it as “Universe” then it suggests a type of harmony one can depend upon as it relates to creating change within the universe. With hardship comes ease also suggest a type of natural balance between output and input. The reading of this balance, again, needs to stay in conversation with the Designer/Gardener as well as with the project. The project’s evolution then suggest that it does actually have a natural end or “flowering” mode but it is up to the Gardener/Designer to listen and act accordingly based on what they can bear and how the environment responds to their response to the thing they are trying to develop.

It is not the assumption that this design methodology is only for Muslims or people who believe in some deity or even the “Universe.” The idea for HIIPE is that one’s own personal governing principles or values statement should be included in the design paradigm and not thought of as separate from that paradigm. If one is Buddhist it is Buddhist design, if one is Atheist it is Atheist design. The core element is that one should be in conversation with themselves, i.e working on some form of personal development that is in line with the goal they wish to create. In the words of Ghandi, one must first “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” The struggle to shift one’s own being will then mirror the struggle for existence of the flower one tends.

The HIIPE design methodology is predicated upon the belief that some level of real change is possible and that individuals, or more accurately communities of individual, have the power to subvert traditional systems of power. HIIPE acknowledges the past while also inherently making the assumption that nature is not capricious and that the same experiences that could give one the idea for creating a disruptive Project also simultaneously lays the seed for that Project to bloom. The rest is in conversation between the Designer/Gardener and the Flower.

## **Chapter 4: Tadthakir Reflection**

My spring 2018 “Prototest” had been successful, though it brought unexpected conflicts with several peers. I knew that there were people, ideas, and sentiments I had been missing while following the prescribed navigational politics of my program. My “prototest” was an X. It was a type of shaking of an apple tree to get quicker access to the necessary assets to fulfill my original objectives at MIT. It also challenged me to think deeper about how to use the specifics of my situation, a low-income Black kid navigating a top tier space, to lay a foundation of thought and ideation that could generate design concepts for years to come.

I captured over 60 hours of audio by talking with different students. I met my thesis advisor and was introduced to a whole other side of campus through the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. It also brought me closer with some peers despite being alienated from others.

It also forced me to question my own assumptions about myself, particularly around toxic masculinity. I begin to ask what masculinity even means in the context of my intersectional identity.

I ultimately came back to the concept of survival instincts. I begin to ask myself where I had picked up the various habits, good or bad, that had become a part of my way of navigating systems. It started to flush out a concept of the multiplicity of an instinct and of the resulting Data Realities of others, whether seen or unseen by me, as well as the NF I did perceive from my various disruptive projects.

I begin experimenting with ways of visualizing or communicating these dualities and multiplicities as they related to the cultivation of instincts. I wanted to experiment with the idea of having to switch from the masculine to the feminine, passive to aggressive, commanding but malleable, the Queer and the Muslim, the poor kid from Jackson Mississippi and the MIT academic all in one body or even sometimes in one day.

This led me down a path to try to get a better understanding of how these ideas related to the Black experience and how to communicate that in an academic context. It ultimately drove me to a deeper design question: What would it look like to start to cultivate a new medium of communication? How could one use new technology to tell a story that was both qualitative and captured the heart and weight of the Black experience

while also being qualitative and organically blending the data around low income Black youth with accessible narratives for the political, business, and social impact world?

Moreover, how could one organically fund this project and use that process of funding while designing to supplement the overall goals of a holistic design process? In essence, if one was creative and strategic enough to organize, fund, and a self contained design structure within a larger institution then the biproduct of that designed structure would be sustainable in the long term. By turning the X moments into Quasar work, then designing the core mechanics



based off personal inspiration in addition to the NF (negative force) created by disrupting the system, then the communication medium created should be able to travel and grow, and yield more design structures with a higher chance of success for long term viability. It was a pivot from a pivot. Instead of X being the only response to challenging the system, it would become a point of origin for a journey that, in a way, mirrors the journey of the privileged.

I begin to bring everything, all the parts of my life that had previously been sectioned off as belonging to different goals, and trying to pull them into one project. After a successful demo of my VR project in summer 2018 in Detroit and in Ghana in 2018 I knew that it had a powerful impact on users. Now I just needed to build on that in some way and add the personal quest to it while making it fit my experiences at MIT.

## Chapter 4 The Quasar Lab

Here we begin our journey of design process. The first artifact is the document articulating the start of the Quasar Lab.

“Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.”  
--Norman Vincent Peale



The Quasar lab is an iterative experiment in institutional hacking as a form of resistance and cultural expression. It challenges notions of space and time by shifting the prescribed navigational norms of institutions to create new pathways to design. It uses interstellar phenomena as a context for developing viable, sustainable prototypes as potential long-term solutions to social change.

A **quasar** is an extremely luminous active galactic nucleus (AGN). The power radiated by quasars is enormous: the most powerful quasars have luminosities exceeding  $10^{41}$  watts, thousands of times greater than an ordinary large galaxy such as the Milky Way. The image above is an artist's rendering of the accretion disk in ULAS J1120+0641, a very distant quasar powered by a black hole with a mass two billion times that of the Sun. Figure 19 is a rendering of this.<sup>85</sup>

Like these interstellar phenomena, we believe there are individuals and works of art that also radiate extreme power that can surpass normal laws of physics. When combined with engineered mechanisms using new technology, we believe this energy can be harnessed and used to drive long-term social change. We call these mechanisms “celestial techno-cultural” tools.

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<sup>85</sup> [information@eso.org](mailto:information@eso.org), “An Artist’s Rendering of the Most Distant Quasar.”

## Why Allow A Student-Created Lab?

The Quasar lab attempts to prove its theories through its very existence. It is the core of Sultan Sharrief's Masters thesis entitled "Quasars, Wrestling with Institutional Edges". It proposes that beyond the margin of the civic edge of academia and the civic edge of the entertainment industry lies a space for creating celestial techno-cultural (CTC) tools that could potentially reverse long-term impacts of slavery, institutional racism, classism, and discrimination.

Consider the image to the right. If the two faces represent the institutions of academia and entertainment, then the "vase" in the middle would be the galactic space where the Quasar lab sits. Its shape is a negative space between the existing institutions. To get to this space, and design from it, it is

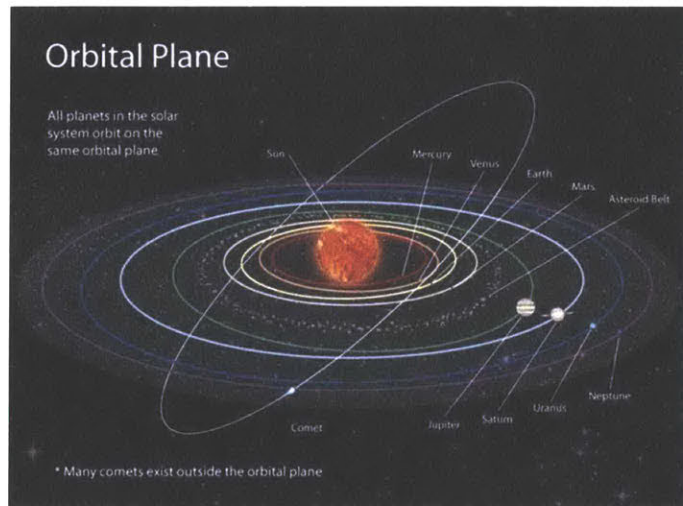


Figure 21

therefore necessary to go beyond the existing margins of prescribed institutional practice by deviating from the normal pathways created to navigate those institutions. Now consider this notion of "deviation" with regard to MIT's institutional structure of its labs in the Comparative Media Studies program and the MIT Media Lab. Traditionally students are placed in a lab in which they do research under a Lab Director or Primary Investigator. More often than not, the trajectories of the research projects are roughly determined by the PI's research/publishing interests, sponsoring companies, NGO's, or other academic entities that fund projects or pre-determined project categories. Think about these funding entities in relation to the gravitational pull of our Sun and the orbit of the planets. If you consider the perspective of the funding entities, it is in their interest to support the funded exploration of these fields as it might ultimately further the goals of their company or institution. Think of this as an orbital plane. By default every project has fulfilled some criteria to have received funding in the first place and that path was predetermined by some other policy, funding paradigm, RFP, company motivation, P.I. research interest, NGO mission statement, etc.

However, if one can assume that most successful companies or NGO's that can afford to provide support on such a high level or a researcher with tenure or the ability to get funding have (in some way shape or form) benefited from the existing paradigm of social structure, then most initiatives will have some prescribed trajectory or desired outcome (usually in the form of some prototype deliverable, or academic report, white paper, etc.) that itself serves an institutional benefit: clout, recruitment, fundraising, publishing etc. The instincts of "institutional navigating" or "game playing" that have yielded that position of the researcher or the funds to fund a project have also shaped the trajectory of the desired projects. So any space that, Mars for example, occupies within its orbital plane is still in the prescribed path of its orbit. The same can be said for films, TV shows, and distribution platforms like Netflix or Amazon prime in the entertainment industry.

These predetermined outcomes, whose orbital planes fit the institutions, fit into the existing paradigm or social structure which, in the interest of low income youth and youth of color, do not serve their interest if the goal is to discover some newly- formed mechanism of change. So if the comet in figure 21<sup>86</sup> represents a mechanism that increases graduation rates in majority LatinX communities, then that mechanism will never be encountered if the design pathways stay within the prescribed path of institutional spatial relationships.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the MIT lab structure assumes that time is a constant with regard to design. So if a Masters student's role in relation to research is pre-determined, then it assumes that each student's design capacity is a standard with relation to time. As it connects to solutions for social change that impact low income youth and youth of color, the Quasar lab (and its proposed existence) challenges this notion. It proposes that space and time are relative to the success of any intervention designed for low-income youth and youth of color



Figure 22

and therefore what could be designed within any moment is

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<sup>86</sup> Society, "Orbital Plane."

drastically different than what could be designed in another moment by the same person, or group, or even with exactly the same resources. The Quasar lab would argue that time and a “catchy” or “sticky” factor is actually more important than the thing that’s designed. Therefore one needs to design for the space or trajectory in which the design is going to take place if that initial design is connected to the successful distribution of the thing being designed.

Consider this: A fragrance by Beyonce in 2018 is going to sell and be used by a drastically different number of people than the exact same chemical makeup if it was released after Beyonce’s first single album in 2003<sup>87</sup>. Her brand, (after several successful albums, playing the Super-bowl, marrying Jay-Z, having children, Jay-Z’s song *New York State of Mind*, going to Knick’s basketball games, etc.) has a different value that impacts the success of the sale of that fragrance. This is reflected in the marketing design of the poster as well as the container for the fragrance. So this timing, which is standard understanding of an artists’ value in the entertainment world, is a crucial design aspect connected to the design and branding of the fragrance itself. From here we can also assume that the design of a social intervention is specific to the timing of its release and the designer’s relationship to design factors (like celebrity) at the time of the design.

We can also assume that, in the realm of designing cultural artifacts, time and trajectory are inter-connected based on the elements that come together to create the catchiness of a particular design. This is another core assertion behind the Quasar lab and leads into its scientific approach.

There is a famous, oft misquoted, saying by Norman Vincent Peale: “Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars.” From this saying it can be interpreted that if you’re aiming for something, even if you don’t achieve it, you’ll still be somewhere better than where you started. Or, in addition, one can glean from it that you can achieve other great things while trying to do your first, even if you don’t achieve your original goal. Both these interpretations assume that the journey established in pursuit of something impacts one’s ability to accomplish that thing. The trajectory of that

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<sup>87</sup> Mau, “Beyoncé Has Sold \$400 Million in Fragrances -- And Is About to Launch a Third.”



journey and the inertia or force put into starting that trajectory can then be assumed to be operating in relationship to the vibration (vibe) or frequency of the object. Consider Figure 23<sup>88</sup> on the right. It shows normal

gravity in operation with a projectile in motion. Now imagine if that object is a cultural object or sensation created by a “Quasar artist.”

Let’s consider the “Moonwalk” created by pop star Michael Jackson. It was reported that Jackson originally did the Moonwalk in 1984 during a live taping of the Motown 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary show. Assume the trajectory of the Moonwalk as a cultural object could be plotted like a physical object with regard to space, time, and gravity. Let’s compare it to a normal trajectory dance move like “Walk Like An Egyptian”. Both are cultural objects created in the 80’s in connection with a popular artist of the time. Yet, go to any school dance, wedding, or dance party almost anywhere in the world in 2018 and it is only a matter of time before someone starts to Moonwalk. In addition, there are several other dance moves, like this “joking air walk” video with Yoyo Ma<sup>89</sup> that have their root in the Moonwalk. So it can then be assumed that some uncharted “sticky” factor of the Moonwalk (which is a combination of Michael Jackson’s instincts, his brand, popularity, media technology of the time, the persistence of his follow-up albums, the moment in time of the dance’s release, etc.) give it a completely different trajectory than the *Walk Like An Egyptian Dance*. From a physics standpoint, something about that dance allows it to defy gravity. So even though both dances are cultural objects that might have initially had a presumably similar physical force, the trajectory of the *Moonwalk* has far surpassed *Walk Like an*

*Egyptian* and its end destination has yet to be discovered.

The Quasar lab is interested in a level of design that studies these “uncharted” sticky or catchy factors of the arts and entertainment that allow cultural artifacts to defy

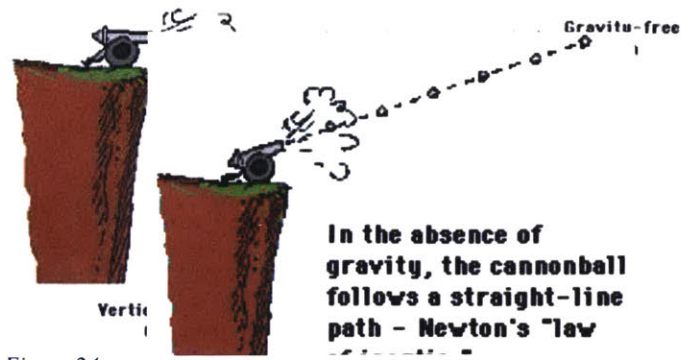


Figure 24

Figure 25

<sup>88</sup> “What Is a Projectile?”

<sup>89</sup> “Opening Ceremony Blog Exclusive - Spike Jonze Presents: Lil Buck and Yo-Yo Ma - YouTube.”

normal physics and create long term change. We will examine ways to first chart then capture these “catchy” “hot” “sexy” “sticky” “tipping point” factors and combine them with design of apps and that incorporate new technologies like Virtual/Augmented reality to create CTC tools for social change.

## **Benefits to MIT**

This is not simply a personal initiative but rather a new way for MIT as an institution to take the lead in innovation and design. The goal of the lab is to become self-sustainable through the projects and its own grants. Through these new navigational politics and connection to the entertainment industry it allows MIT to impact areas of pop culture and media that we haven’t impacted before. If one of the projects is successful it could also provide distribution pathways for other existing MIT initiatives to permeate into the mainstream.

It also fits into the CMS/W and MIT ethos. The CMS/W site says it is “An innovative humanities program that applies critical analysis, collaborative research, and design across media arts, forms, and practices.” If our goal is to promote critical analysis of media systems then the Quasar Lab serves this function by showing how students can implement what they are learning about academic media and structure it with regard to MIT itself. The website goes on to say, “We cultivate practitioners, scholars, and artists who can work in multiple forms of contemporary media.” What other structures or shapes might emerge at MIT or other universities based on the model presented here and the projects described. The Quasar lab will push boundaries of how students engage in institutional practices (like finding creative ways to fund their research) and designing projects that can have multiple benefits and community engagement forms.

The Quasar theme and approach also seeks to contribute to CMS/W’s tradition of applying the same level of rigor to the social sciences that are applied to technical subjects and engineering. The lab itself is essentially questioning the engineering of the learning environment and proposing alternative models. It also challenge assumptions about prescribed learning environments and seeks for unbiased research in the same ways we do in the engineering fields.

The inclusion of celebrities (in project four below) and the social aspect planned for the lab also brings a level of “sexy” and “trendiness” to the learning structure and promotes transparency into the constructed learning environment. The CMS site also says, “Our students and research help shape the future as critical and visionary partners at a time of rapid transformation.” The next section addresses time and its relationship to designing for social change.

## **Why Now? The Importance of a Moment**

As of spring 2018, there are several key factors that have led to the declaration that this time has the potential for design of a social intervention with the potential for success unlike any other time before. Some of these factors include:

- 1) Political climate which has brought together the alignment of activists from previously distant groups such as the marches of 2017 which combined Immigrants rights, Muslim Ban activists, Women’s rights activists, and environmental activists all at the same time. The election of 2020 will therefore be a hot bed of action and conversation on this front. The growth of the Me Too movement and the conversations around identity politics have also pushed the left into a more nuanced way of seeing social issues.
- 2) Release of Black Panther has furthered notions of Afro-futurism and brought it into the mainstream and sparked participation and activation by thousands of previously dormant potential activists. Therefore the time between the first film and the projected release of the second film houses unique potential for tapping what Henry Jenkins calls the “civic imagination.” (Incidentally Henry Jenkins has weighed in on this lab as well).
- 3) Childish Gambino’s 2018 #1 hit *This is America* and the Emmy winning show *Atlanta*, combined with Donald Glover’s brand, has pushed Blerd (Black Nerd) culture into the forefront.
- 4) Bitcoin and crypto currency are just hitting the urban market and early adopters have already shown an interest in the potential for this new technology as a catalyst for social change.
- 5) Decline in trust in data abuses by social media giants like Facebook through the

Cambridge Analytica scandal.

6) The push in the entertainment industry towards greater diversity and willingness of industry veterans to speak out. This is seen in Effie Brown's recent work as well as the Seed and Spark 2018 Colorfull campaign.

7) The maturation and institutional deviation of rappers and Black elites like Dr. Dre, who sold Beats by Dre to Apple for 3 Billion and started a lab at USC. Nas did a whole lab at Harvard. Chance The Rapper made headlines for declaring he wants to go back to school.<sup>90</sup>

8) This also coincides with athletes like LeBron James and others donning "preppy" or Blerd looks and bringing Black Hipster culture into popular urban culture.<sup>91</sup>

9) The growing success of several of my friends and early collaborators and their connection to all of the aforementioned individuals including Jessica Care Moore, Eric Welles-Nystrom, Qasim Basir, Effie Brown, Allee Willis, Tommy Oliver, Moira Griffin, Kellyn Parker, Juan Atkins, and more.



10) After my iterative experimental disruption in spring 2018, I've met several potential collaborators at MIT interested in exploring opportunities for students to disrupt traditional navigational politics of the space representing CMS, the Media Lab, Provosts Office, Dean for Graduate Affairs, OEP, OEME, Admissions & Financial Aid, Black Student Union, Black Alumni Association, and Sloan school.

Figure 26

### **The Metaphysical: Everything Happens for a Reason**

Are there modern day Shaman? What might they look like in an inner city? Have all the "seers" that oral traditions in African and Native American culture discuss died

<sup>90</sup> Moon, "Chance the Rapper Wants to Go Back to College — and Colleges Want Him."

<sup>91</sup> "Lebron-James-Fashion-Style | MEN | LeBron James, Nba Fashion, King Lebron James."

out? Where is the place for spiritual guidance or indigenous intuitive decision making in the modern design context?

The final element of the Quasar lab seeks to explore these questions and others. It has to do with the study of the metaphysical or spiritual as it relates to movement building and long-term solutions. Though there has been much study on the role of religious institutions on social change, we hope to study how metaphysical belief can shift navigational trajectories and contribute to movement building among low income youth and youth of color.

Phrases like: “Everything happens for a reason” or “When someone wants something bad enough the whole Universe conspires to help them get it” or “Let me meditate on it” or “we were on the same vibe” or “Speak it into existence” are becoming common in low income communities of color and are starting to replace the traditional role of the church as the spiritual glue that brings people together. Conversations about blood memories, Post- Slavery Stress Disorder (PSSD), spiritual guides, healers, Sufis, as well as tribal notions of “seers,” inter-generational healing, tribal justice and transformative justice are becoming part of the public consciousness and driving a desire for connection and understanding of internal as well as external change. At the Quasar lab we hope to take some of these metaphysical notions, examine the role they play in people’s daily lives and decision making, and attempt to give them a scientific contextualization that incorporates them into the design of disruptive intervention technology.

### **The Structure: Community based Research teams**

The lab launched in the fall of 2018 and brought MIT students together with high school students, community organizations, MIT departments, and world-renowned artists to collectively study and design CTC tools that build upon existing research around social issues. It attempted to be purely solution focused and ventured into spaces beyond the “Politically Correct” in order to get at the hidden truths around social issues so as to design viable solutions.

It was comprised of the following structure:

- 1) MIT undergraduates and graduate students through UROP and our Research Time Bank\* collaborator experiment.
- 2) One youth program with 4-7 middle to high school student researchers
- 3) One Community organizations in the Cambridge/Boston area as community research partners
- 4) Held 5 visiting “Quasars in Residence” who are world renown artists, inventors, change makers, and influencers who will partner in mini research projects focused around their work and its intersections with potential social change.

## **The Projects**

Most large galaxies contain a supermassive central black hole with mass ranging from millions to billions of solar masses. In quasars and other types of AGN, the black hole is surrounded by a gaseous accretion disk. As gas in the accretion disk falls toward the black hole, energy is released in the form of electromagnetic radiation. This radiation can be observed across the electromagnetic spectrum at radio, infrared, visible, ultraviolet, and X-ray, and gamma wavelengths.

The Quasar lab looked at ways to harness the energy of Black Holes that have historically prevented the design of interventions to dramatically close the achievement gap of low income youth and youth of color. Over the 2018/2019 year the lab embarked on ambitious design projects. In line with the quote of shooting for the stars, the goal is not to successfully build these things as planned. Instead the goal is to use these initial ideas as launching platforms, then let them take shape as students, community members, administrators, time, resources, and other factors come into play that will ultimately shape their final design. If they end up being paper prototypes after months of discussion, then that would be considered success.

For the purposes of year 1, the Quasar lab focused on projects to empower low income Black youth in America. Similar to the philosophy behind Google’s Deep Mind A.I. created to play the game Go!<sup>92</sup> the goal is that, if we can successfully design products

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<sup>92</sup> Byford, “AlphaGo Retires from Competitive Go after Defeating World Number One 3-0.”

that work for these often hardest to reach marginalized communities, they can be adapted to work for other communities as well.

### **Conclusion Defying The Odds & Demystifying The Odds**

As part of the Quasar lab we were trying to explore the science of defying the odds by examining the ways that different individuals have created lives, careers, or works of art that have far surpassed what was expected given their initial disadvantages. We tried new approaches to funding research projects, structuring research teams, and creating cultural artifacts and products. We successfully laid a foundation for other student led research projects that might explode out of the Quasar lab and the boundaries of scientific and cultural exploration at MIT.

## **Conclusion: What We Made**

Here our Tadthakir Reflection blends with the actual design as the two become inseparable. As soon as fall hit I immediately begin planning my first event to test out my goals and the HIIPE design methodology. I posted an ad for UROP students to join a student created lab and got 4 freshman who were excited about the possibilities of using new technology and design principles to create social structures.

I had also had an “epiphany” moment when speaking to Techno originator, Juan Atkins, shortly after my trip to Ghana. I told him about my plans to capitalize on the infatuation with Afrofuturism based on the excitement I had seen around Wakanda and the level of civic engagement Marvel’s Black Panther had spurred. His response was “Fuck Wakanda! Before there was Wakanda there was Detroit.” I wrote it down and it became the basis for our first event.

I connected with the local techno scene at MIT and added in an element of “Healing” to address my goals of creating a holistic approach to design. I also wanted to make the space of the Media Lab building more hospitable after the somewhat hostile air I felt after my Spring 2018 disruption.

The result was a Healing Halloween Party. I had organically met several musicians and artists in different programs in the Media Lab and Art Culture & Technology (ACT) programs so I invited them to participate in the planning. This led me to get contacted by a local DJ and other group INFINIT and they ended up marketing the event in their community much more effectively than I could have.

I partnered with two filmmakers from Detroit, Jenn Washington and Kristian Hill, that were making a Techno documentary. I then contacted Open Doc Lab at MIT and arranged for them and Juan to give a lecture as part of the ODL lecture series. I was also connected from there to someone at Berklee School of Music and it turned out they were unveiling a new Electronic Music Library the same week as our event. So they came on board as co-sponsors of the event to offset some of the costs and help market the event.

I created a ticket price and used ticket sales to cover the costs of Juan’s travel and other event costs of what was now a four part event.





I had intended to also use the event as a type of recruiting event for the lab to get other students who were interested in doing disruptive creative events that would build community while also designing social structures. However, because the INFINIT group did such a good job marketing, we ended up selling over 250 tickets and I and my four UROP interns were totally overwhelmed with event logistics that some of the other goals fell by the wayside.

At the end of the day, however, the event proved successful as it laid a foundation for the Quasar Lab to get notoriety and high regard from the student body and also served as an X that flushed other students and future collaborators out of the woodwork. It also created some NF based on how I deviated from the prescribed organizing structure for events on campus, but this would ultimately create more allies than enemies.

Immediately after the event we begin planning the VR tool. I applied for three different MIT graduate student grants for using technology to promote dialog on campus. We also partnered with the February School student organization to do another event in February.

I then begin working with my UROP team to design a VR communication tool that could accomplish the goals outlined earlier in the chapter. The tool, Realizistance, would take data and allow a user to move the data around in a virtual space to simulate potential futures in a type of speculative non-fiction.

It would work as follows:

### The Realizistance:

A VR based tool that allows for more intuitive data visualization and manipulation

1. Data input
2. Conversion of data into representations
3. Manipulation of data:
  1. Selection & Movement
  2. Morphing
  3. Deconstruction
  4. Reassignment/reconstruction

### Example scenarios:

1. Additives: Prison Scenario
2. Reductives: Black (W)hole Data
3. Comparatives: Detroit, but make it South Korea

### 1. Data input

#### DATA INPUT

The user inputs their data via a simple numerical input set up:

People:	<input type="text" value="12,000"/>
Residential:	<input type="text"/>
Financial:	<input type="text"/>
Environmental:	<input type="text"/>
(etc.)	

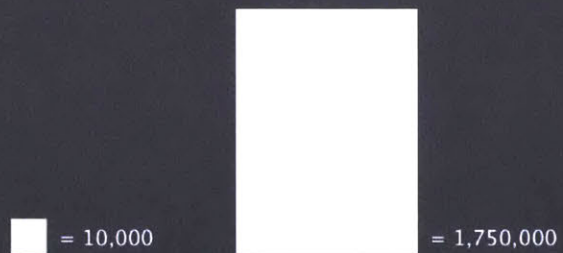
Inputs and categories are customizable to the user's specific data set / scenario

## 2. Conversion of data into representations

### CONVERSION OF DATA

When the VR headset is put on, and the environment is entered, the user's data inputs are converted into 3D interactive representations.

For each input category, towers of blocks are spawned in the VR sandbox. Each block represents a unitary value of the larger categorical data set.



## 3. Manipulation of data: 1. Selection & Movement

### MANIPULATION OF DATA: SELECTION & MOVEMENT

Using the VR headset controllers, a subsection of blocks (data) can be selected and moved to the sandbox.



3. Manipulation of data:

2. Morphing



MANIPULATION OF DATA: MORPHING

The block/data subsection can be morphed to take on a visual character, by placing it in a specific morphing location.

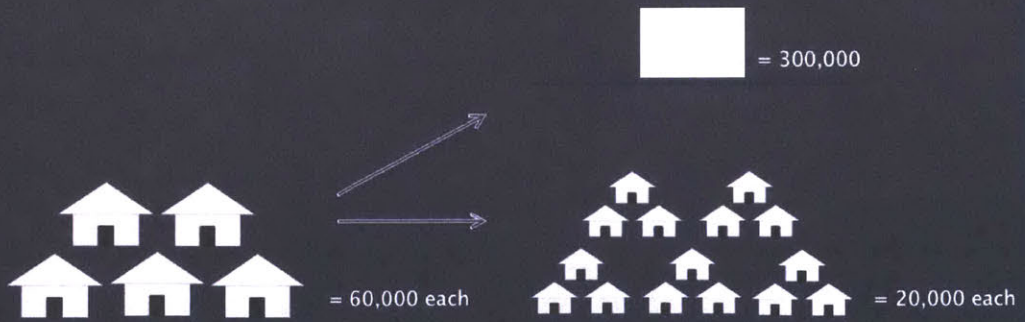


3. Manipulation of data:

3. Deconstruction

MANIPULATION OF DATA: DECONSTRUCTION

Blocks can be deconstructed into further subdivisions of data, or back into blocks to be morphed and reconstructed into a different character altogether.



Example scenarios:

## 2. Reductives: Black (W)hole Data

### BLACK (W)HOLE DATA

What does the Black-White achievement gap really look like?

Statistical analysis of the racial achievement gap often fails to show the whole picture. Factors such as disparity between immigrant African and Black achievement, drop out rates, high school transfers and incarceration inaccurately minimizes the gap.

Starting with the base analysis, layers of inaccuracies can be peeled back.

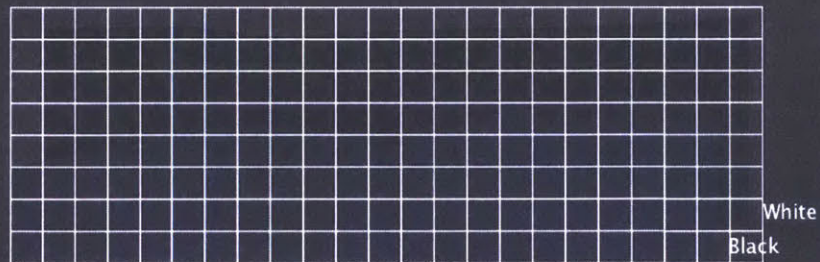
Example scenarios:

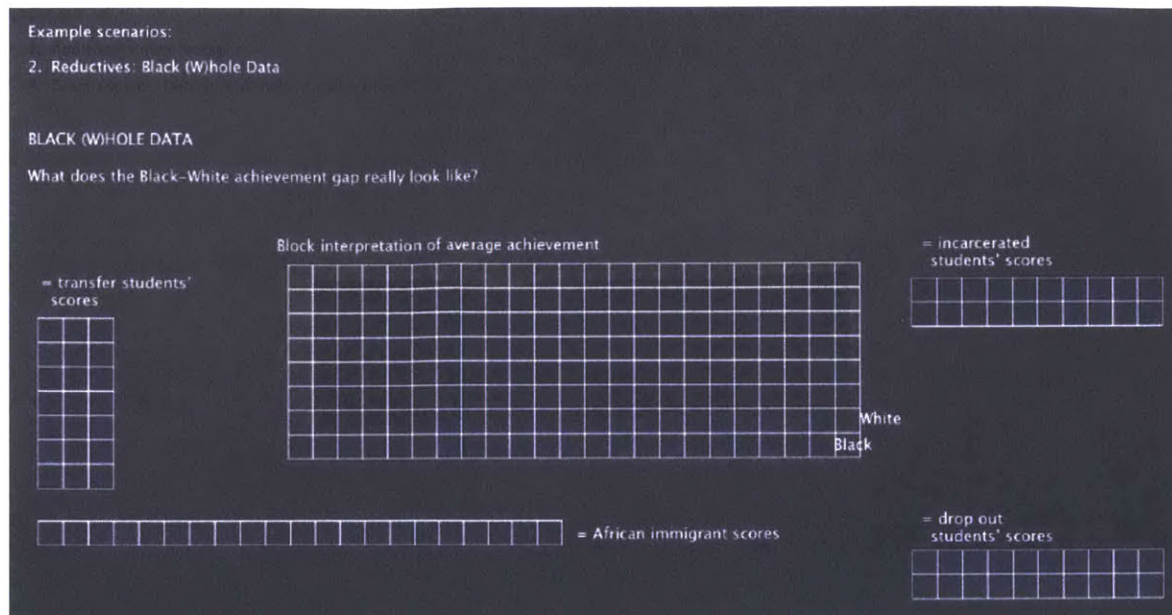
## 2. Reductives: Black (W)hole Data

### BLACK (W)HOLE DATA

What does the Black-White achievement gap really look like?

Block interpretation of average achievement





What the overall design is attempting to do is to create a virtual world in which the individuals being represented by the data could also be given some form of agency through virtual technologies. In a sense, we wanted to turn data points into characters so that we could add layers of narrative on top of them and start to show them in a much more comprehensive, human way.

This would also allow different data sets to be brought together into the same space. So if one was looking at data for individuals based on health, they could navigate a “physical” space that represented the data of health centers in their area. This way different data sets would be in conversation with each other by using world building tools to create a virtual space for them to coexist.

Initial demos and prototypes of the tool gave us really positive feedback, however, I wanted to attempt to take it a step further by adding the individual layer. I wanted to see if it was possible to structure a narrative (what this text attempts to do with the breakdown of the chapters and created words and images) that would give the viewer an understanding of the world of the data as well as the world of the designer then hold those two things in conversation with each other.

So for the next layer of the HIIPE process I decided to add my personal data to the design to see if it could yield an additional perspective. One thing I had been articulating since the beginning of my quest was a need for a deeper understanding of the

Black American experience. This came into question in the ‘Street Cred’ VR film *When It All Changed*. In the film, Black high school students invite local rival community members and the police to participate in a “compassion dance.” A fight breaks out with the community members and the police get involved. In the middle of the chaos, the host of the event begins doing the dance. Slowly, but surely, all of the other people (since they had only come to the event to participate in the dance) also begin to dance.

We had gotten pushback on this decision to allow the police to dance with the students in the story. When we were initially challenged, I had written off the criticism as not understanding what we were trying to say. The way that I had “written off” this critique had been read through a gendered lens. And since I was still in the process of questioning some of the elements of my personality that could be considered “toxic masculinity” I wanted to get a better understanding about where the desire to have the police dance, but also my dismissal of the criticism came from. This led me to write the following medium article here [DA #15

title | **Dancing in VR with Ancestors**  
A Sufi approach to Co-Creation in Mixed Reality



**Abstract**

This article will study the Co-Creation techniques used in the *When It All Changed (WIAC)* interactive, mixed reality, performance piece. The development of this project has, to date, spanned almost three years and has involved dozens of contributors to reach the current version. By dissecting several

In the article, I explore how Black identity might be thought of differently if framed in a Muslim context. I use oral traditions from our family about our Native American and Jewish ancestors and play with the idea of standing in conversation with ones ancestors as one attempted to design something organically. One important concept that immediately informed the HIIPE methodology was the following:

“When a person dies, all their deeds end, except three: Sadaqa Jariya (a continuing charity), beneficial knowledge and a child who prays for them.” (hadith of the Prophet peace be upon him). Sadaqah Jariyah is a special charitable act which continues to benefit us even when we have passed from this world.

My parents, along with thousands of others, had initially changed their last name to X to reject the White supremacist/Capitalist/Christian lineage of their given slave names. So as second generation Black Muslim, we were always taught to pray for our ancestors because they were slaves who weren't allowed to read, write, speak traditional languages, or continue any religious practices. So, as the first generation of American born Black Muslims, we had a duty to help them continue to get blessings even in their grave.



"Wind In His Hair" from Dances With Wolves

As an adolescent, I used to picture several slave-looking old Black folks, Wind In His Hair (a character from *Dances With Wolves* who looks like my cousin) and some Africans in tribal garb standing around a King-Arthur-like round table with a crystal ball. They all rooted for us to do good in the world or to pray for them. They would argue over which good deeds we did that came from them or their instincts and cheer when we graduated high school, or helped an old lady carry groceries, because it meant their slate of good deeds would increase.



So what then does it mean if you have as much blood from the White oppressors as you do from any other group? Do they get your prayers too? What if you have survival instincts or learning advantages that come from their blood as much as that African or Indigenous ancestor? Moreover, in what ways are we walking reconciliations of the slave owner and the slave? Or of the rapist and the raped? Can you forgive them enough to love them? Was there some crazy wisdom to God's allowance of slavery that warranted an 18th century White rapist to get blessings for what I do today? How could I forgive the police officers who were killing unarmed Black men if I couldn't forgive my own ancestors who also killed Black men? Or perhaps I needed to approach it from the other way around?

What I started to dig at was the concept of design as it related to also wanted to wrestling with internal edges in addition to external edges. I was beginning to accept that I probably harbored some elements of negative "masculine" traits that I had picked up from my father, and his father, and his father before them. But some of these were slaves. Can a slave have "toxic masculinity."

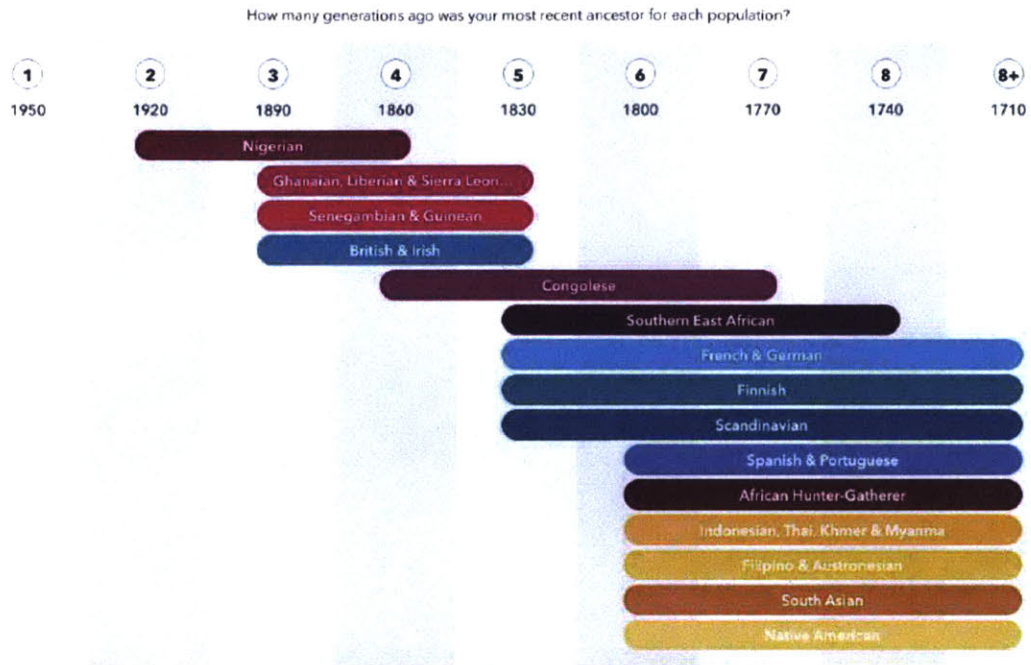
We also have a narrative of "Blood Memories" in my family and faith tradition, meaning that you inherit instincts from your ancestors in your blood (and recent science has proven that DNA contains memories). So I begin to wonder is it possible to inherit toxic masculinity that might have been directed from slave to slave master or slave son to rapist slave-Master father? And what might these narratives mean if put into context and conversation with the narratives about modern low-income Black youth?

Might we consider interventions differently or even narratives about reparations if they were held in context to the internal struggles that might be ingrained down to the cellular level? And if our Realizistance data visualization was talking about Black performance or



Black men in prison, how might this extra layer of narrative shift the context of viewing this data?

This ultimately led me to do a DNA test to get a better understanding of my own DNA and to experiment with trying to add a layer to the Realizistance framework. I thought about the DNA results themselves as a medium that could be used in the transmedia narrative.



Current Ancestry Populations



Upon reading the full report, I begin connecting the oral traditions within my family to the results from my DNA to paint a picture of the potential origins of different instincts, good and bad, that I might have influencing my design.

My team and I then used this to create character profiles of each ancestor. I then leveraged the resources I had been able to collect with the micro-celebrity element of Dr. Cornel West who had agreed to be a part of an event with me, to get actors to play the roles of the ancestors that we would then film with volumetric cameras and add to the data visualization.

## DA#18 Casting call

### **Synopsis:**

Black (W)hole is an interactive virtual reality performance piece using holograms. We will shoot holograms of the actors performing as ancestors from the past. They each guide people through a maze that spans 400 years and all over the globe.

The project It is a physical/virtual installation exhibit of award winning filmmaker Sultan Sharrief's Masters Thesis at MIT in Comparative Media. It blends video, volumetrically captured holograms, musical performance, physical dance into a journey through Sharrief's DNA.

### **Character BIOS**

[Emma Williams] [GENDER: FEMALE] [AGE: 20-30]

Jewish woman, classic look. Handsome features. Slim to medium build. Emma was the First wife to Dan Williams and had seven children. Must be comfortable dancing and receiving direction from choreographer.



[Dan Williams Jr] [GENDER: MALE] [AGE: 20-40]

Black man, can do African dance or Capoeira, comfortable being shirtless. Medium to strong build. strong features. Cool if African (nigerian or Ghanaian or Senegalese) but any black man will do. Must have dancing skills and be comfortable receiving direction from choreographer.



[Papa Tuch] [GENDER: MALE] [AGE: 20-40]

European with dark features. Ideally Latino or Spanish look. White/Arab/ Afro-latino could work. Sexy rockstar look with a bit of a David Bowie or Freddy Mercury flare. Comfortable being filmed shirtless. Can do basic dance choreography and blocking. Fit to Muscular build. 20 to 40. Must be comfortable receiving direction from choreographer.



[Mama Cindy] [GENDER: Female] [AGE: 35-50]

Mama Cindy is the one at the top. Native American. She's Black and Native American so someone bi-racial or Indian or even Latina/Afro Latina could work. Should be able to dance. If she knows any cultural dance that would be great. She's tough, wise, has been through the wilderness leading her family through tough times. Must have dancing skills and be comfortable receiving direction from choreographer.



But here I needed to find a way to connect the idea of instincts from ancestors with the notion of organic design and relate that to both the Street Cred' youth program, the Quasar Lab, the Realizistance tool, and the HIPE methodology. So, I dove deeper into Cesar McDowell's civic design principles. The chart below shows the eight design principles going across and the six stages of design going down.

Civic Design Framework

Design Principles	Design for	Design for	Design for	Design for	Design for	Design for	Design for	Design for
	The Margins	Collaboration	Equity	Systemic Change	Ecological/Network	Analog & Digital	Ways of Expression	Healing
<b>Framing</b> Creating Shared Understanding of the Problem/Opportunity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Ideating</b> Generating Possible Solutions/Actions	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
<b>Prioritizing</b> Identifying Preferences among viable Solutions/Actions	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
<b>Deciding</b> Agreeing on Path(s) Forward and Solutions/Actions to pursue	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32
<b>Implementing</b> Participating in Implementation	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
<b>Monitoring</b> Participating monitoring and accountability	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48

I wanted to find something that was specific to answering the question of how to design something while keeping values and individuals at the forefront. This framework did this better than I could have ever designed myself. They are broken down as follows<sup>93</sup>:

**Design for the Margins** If you design your solution so that it works first for those at the margins, your solution will likely work for those in the middle. However, if you design for the middle (which is the common practice) your solution will continue to not serve those at the margins. Those who live at the margins of society are living with the failures of any given system. Therefore, if you solve the problem for them you are more likely to create a solution that works for the more people.

**Design for Collaboration** Intentionally create a process that requires participants to work collaboratively and to imagine solutions that can only be achieved through collaboration. Most notably collaboration among the demographically complex public and with the institutions that are there to serve the public.

**Design for Equity** This principles has two components. The first, is using equity as a lens to evaluating the design of the space/structure/process. The second is to hold equity as outcome measure for determine feasibility of possible solutions or effectiveness of adopted solutions.

**Design for Systemic Change** The iceberg model of systems thinking reminds us that to effectively address an issue the public needs to understand more than just the event itself. They also need to understand the underlying structures and mental models that created the conditions for the initial event. To design for systemic change requires creating the conditions that enables the public to examine any issues from a systems perspective.

**Design for Ecological Solutions** Systems thinking helps us understand why current practices exist. When the public looks for ecological solutions they are grappling with the interconnectedness of life. As a result, they seek out solutions that mimic the core principles of the natural world. Principles like "In nature there is no waste" and others identified by Tachi Kuichi<sup>8</sup>

**Design for Analog and Digital** We live in a time of rapid technological change. We also live, work and play in physical spaces with friends, families and strangers. In designing spaces/places/processes we must create opportunities for the public to participate in both the digital and the analog worlds. There are great advances being made in online forms of public engagement. Seldom do these advances support to the analog world. The same is true for the advances in person forms of public engagement. People live in both worlds and any effort to engage the complex public must have robust digital and analog design.

**Design for Multiple Forms of Expression** "Anything that is worth teaching can be presented in many different ways. These multiple ways can make use of

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<sup>93</sup> Move, "Design for Systemic Change."

our multiple intelligences.”<sup>9</sup> The human race has multiple ways of making meaning of the world and communicating that meaning. To create spaces that support the building of dialectical relationship among member of a demographically complex public means supporting multiple ways for people to express themselves. This includes, art, music, signing, even sitting in silence. The work the public is important and we need to create spaces that allow the public to speak in all the varied ways that people feel eloquent.

**Design for Healing** For many people and especially those who at the margins of society, participation in public processes has been a repeating story of betrayal. Thus, to get full engagement from these communities requires acknowledgement of past harms and establishment of processes for attending to possible future harms.

Then we took each of the eight design frameworks and imagined them going through the process of the six stages of design. We took each of the four ancestor characters and made a character document based on the idea that they were a living embodiment of two of those principles.

Mama Cindy:

Design for the Margins and Design for Collaboration. As a Native American woman born just after the civil war she worked tirelessly to look out for the members of the family who were not supported by the system. As the matriarch of the family she raised not only her children but innumerable nieces, nephews, grandchildren and even neighbors. Because of this, she knew who could do what for whom so she was a constant facilitator of collaboration.



Dan Williams:

Design for Analog and Digital and Healing. As the patriarch of the family and the only sibling out of 11 to keep his parcel of land abandoned by the White slave owners, he made sure there was space for everyone. He was a preacher so communication was always key. He also allowed his nephew to operate a “Juk Joint” dance club on the property so was known for facilitating multiple mediums communication that allowed for healing in the community.



Incidentally that Juk Joint would become the Mary Myles Daycare Center 70 years later where I and my siblings would attend preschool.

### Emma Dreyfus

Ecological Network and Systemic Change. She was the daughter of a Russian Jew and young mother of 5. As a “Mulatto” (Her mother was either Choctaw Indian or Black or some mix thereof) outcast she could “pass” as White but was married to a Black man in the 1880’s.



Though legally this was the only thing she was allowed to do, she faced constant strife in the community. Therefore to feed her family she had to constantly organize to navigate systems and find new ways to create networks.

### Papa Tuuch

Multiple forms of expression and Equity. He represents the search through masculinity and intersectional identity.

Technically he would have been one quarter of four different races though, because he was named Brazil, he often was read as South American. The White roots in his background signify



a search for equity (not in the sense that the White settlers were concerned with it but rather that their lack of concern creates conflicts internally with their descendants; how can one approach reconciliation and fairness with the very individual who caused hundreds of years of oppression?)

Next we went through the five year history of the Street Cred’ Youth program and the When It All Changed VR film and coded them to the design principle and stage that they fell into. The result was the following.

Event	B	C	D	Design Principal/
Event	Ancestor		Design for	Design Principal/
Filming Cinetopia		Mama Cindy	Margins	#1 Framing
Destined Trailer		Papa Touch	Multiple Forms of Expression	#1 Framing
Pitch Black session @ PBS		Emma	Systemic Change	#1 Framing
Funding Frasco		Papa Touch	Equity	#1 Framing
Meetings, Meetings, Meetings		Mama Cindy	Collaboration	#1 Framing
Street Cred Auditions		Mama Cindy	Margins	#2 Ideating
Oculus launchpad		Dan Williams	Analog and Digital	#1 Framing
Destined LA Film Fest Premiere		Emma	Ecological Network	#1 Framing
Street Cred Prep Week		Emma	Systemic Change	#2 Ideating
Street Cred Filming Day 1: Fight with Orin		Mama Cindy	Collaboration	#2 Ideating
Street Cred Filming Day 1: Jerome + Ori		Papa Touch	Multiple Forms of Expression	#3 Ideating
Showing up Workshop		Mama Cindy	Margins	#3 Prioritizing
Knee to Knee Exercise		Mama Cindy	Collaboration	#3 Prioritizing
Street Cred Filming Day 2: Pitching		Dan Williams	Analog and Digital	#2 Ideating
Street Cred Filming Day 2: Detroit ----> Ann Arbor Equity		Papa Touch	Equity	#2 Ideating
Street Cred Filming Day 2: Jerome + Ori		Dan Williams	Healing	#1 Healing
Street Cred Filming Day 2: Max almost quits			Ecological Network	#2 Ideating
Street Cred Filming Day 2: Michigan Theatre logistics			Analog and Digital	#3 Ideating
Pitching			Equity	#3 Prioritizing

So now we had 48 specific moments that were attributed to the eight design fields and the six stages of design. We then found and edited 48 3-5 minute videos from the five year history of Street Cred' that would correlate to each of the intersecting design moments. We then attributed two of the design fields as character traits of each of the four ancestors and built a character profile of their possible life based on the timeline we had from the DNA results.

Next we brought on a local choreographer, Callie Chapman, and taught her the civic design principles. She then choreographed interpretive dance based on these profiles and taught them to the actors/dancers we'd brought on to the process.

We then gave the dances and the civic design principles to a VR animator, and he made "Runes" symbols for each character at each stage of design. The goal of this was to begin to create a language where one could organically introduce each character, introduce the civic design principle, relate it to the Street Cred' narrative, then relate that to the data about low income Black youth that was being presented.

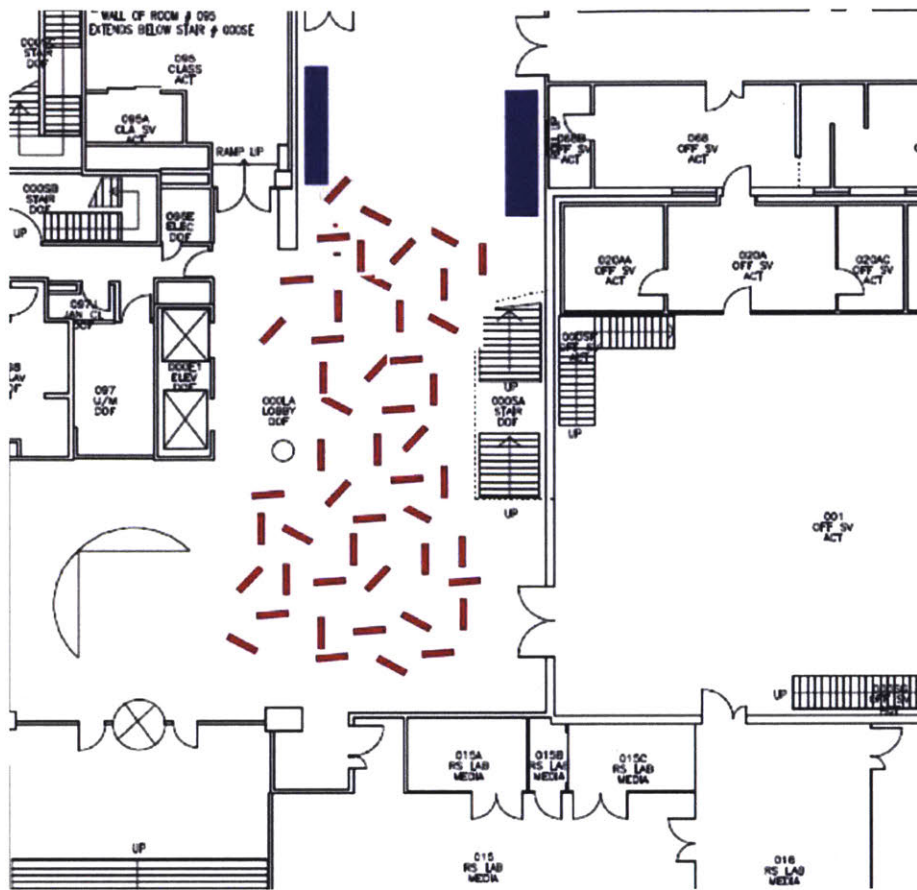




This would turn the Street Cred' one hour TV pilot into a much more robust interactive documentary. By putting the narrative into a VR space, it would allow the user to walk through the narrative and experience all of the different moments of the five year journey of making the show while standing in the new container that was created to house the show.

We then designed a physical/virtual maze that had fifty walls in which the user could walk through the five year journey of creating the experience. I got another grant from Institute for the Community Equity Office (ICEO) at MIT. Ironically this was the office whose data work I was criticizing in my Spring 2018 protest. Essentially I had leveraged the disruption

(X) and took the negative force (NF) and by staying in dialog with the NF I had found mutual goals and alignment and turned the NF into additional QW. We would build the actual maze in the lobby of the MIT E-14 building as part of the Media in Transition conference being put on by Comparative Media Studies (the department I was originally prototesting). Again X had resulted in NF which was then converted to QW.



The goal of this maze was to physicalize the feeling of “navigational politics” by forcing the viewer to have to walk through a labyrinth in order to reach the end of the story. It seeks to simulate the experience of low income youth who navigate predominantly White, privileged spaces. We chose a VR headset, the Lenovo Mirage Solo, which has a pass-through camera that allows the user to see the real world (in Black and White) while also seeing the virtual world. This dual vision fit the core ideas of Realizistance because it allows us to communicate multiple narratives on multiple planes while also using the symbols created with holograms of the ancestors. I would then perform with actors the telling of the story of Street Cred’ as it related to the narratives of the ancestors and the data concepts like Black Hole Data, Quasar Work, Shafrodeen, Negative Force, Propinquital Loops, Micro-Celebrity, and X. We then took these concepts and also coded

them to the Runes so that each of them could be viewed in conversation with the notion or emotion that created it.

At each stage of the process I would test out the performance to see if it was communicating what I wanted. I realized I was missing some connective tissue that would more easily communicate the overall story structure. Throughout my disruptions, I had been listening to several songs on Youtube to motivate me and give me strength as I endured the NF that resulted from my actions. I noticed that the Youtube algorithm could, based on the first song I picked, guess what mood I was in and would begin an auto-play playlist based on that mood. So I created a narrative mechanic to organically use these same songs as a communication tool with the ancestors and their instincts.

I begin writing scripts where the ancestors had found a way to communicate with me through my Youtube algorithm. I called it a “Cyber-séance.” In these moments of crisis they would, like a virus, take over my Youtube and give me the song that I needed to persevere through whatever conflict I was battling-both internally and externally. I found a song that would serve as an ideal starting point, and scripted that to be the opening number of the musical.

This would also be a type of X in that I was re-appropriating the original purpose of the song and turning it into a narrative of empowerment for low income Black youth. Then I would perform each data visualization using the Realizistance tool and use physical movement and performance to communicate how all the pieces tied together.

## ACT 1

**Hologram images** pop up next to each word in the air. Meta = Ancestor-->Sultan-->Street Cred. Raw data = DNA Results. The text next to them gets bigger into a square cube. Text = Data summary. Image = Ancestors. As he speaks, ancestors spawn children.

### SULTAN

In Islam we have a narrative called Blood Memories. It means memories passed down in your loins from mother to child and so on. Now they even have scientific evidence that DNA contains memories.

An image of the **article headline** pops up in a cube. Next we see a **shirtless AR Sultan** pop up with **VEIN LINES** that seem to glow bright.

The next **Hadith** pops up in another cube. When a cube pops up, it stays where it is and hangs in the air. As Sultan connects dots, **lines are drawn** between the different cubes representing the different points.

### SULTAN (CONT'D)

There's a **hadith**, a saying of the prophet **Muhammed**, that says, The Messenger of Allah (sal Allahu alaihi wa sallam) said: "When a man dies, his deeds come to an end except for three things: **Sadaqah Jariyah** (ceaseless charity); knowledge which is beneficial; or a virtuous descendant who prays for him ." [Sahih Muslim]

As he explains this, **the Arabic writing** is beautifully written across the sky. As he says the slavery bit, **black and white pictures of ancestors** pop into the air.

### SULTAN (CONT'D)

Here we get a little **Socratic** in our logic so stay with me.

(beat)

(MORE)

SULTAN (CONT'D)

My **parents** came through the nation of Islam and my **father** would always tell us to pray for our **ancestors**. They had been taken from their land, their culture, their language, and their religion so make sure you pray for your ancestors so they get blessings for the good you do.

When he says blessings, balls of light flow from the kids to their ancestors.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

So I pictured this round table of slaves and a **Wind In His Hair**, an Indian from Dances with Wolves cuz he looked like my cousin Bilal. And they would all look down on you like **Mufasa from the clouds**.

As he talks we see the ghosts of the **ANCESTORS** start to very ~~very~~ slowly materialize. They are standing in different entrances to the maze.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

When we were younger we used to play this game bingo. Not the one with the card. It's like a hyper capitalism for poor kids. Whenever you see a car or house or something you want you'd say Bingo- that's my car. Bingo- ~~i'm gonna~~ have that house.

So the **faces of different cousins** pop up under the holograms. When he says circling back. A **line of energy** is drawn from the cousins (IN THE SAME VEIN ENERGY) to the quotation of descendents, to the ancestors.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

So, circling all the way back. I would imagine these ancestors looking down on you like ~~Mufasa~~, and playing bingo with your good deeds based on your blood memories.

(MORE)

SULTAN (CONT'D)

So if one of them was a healer, and someone has an instinct for healing, even if they don't know where it came from, that ancestor would want credit in the grave, right.

We see the Black and Indian ancestor getting energy balls of blessings.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

I gave happily and hope they are honored by my **Saddaga**.

(beat)

But then we did our DNA and found that we are almost 20% European.

**Napoleon** pops up.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

We know some of that is from my great great grandmother **Emma** whose father, Old man **Dreyfus**, was a Russian Jew.

Emma pops up.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

But there are all these other people whose blood is in my veins.

We see the other DNA results pop up. Each country connected to a different place. Sultan talks over the images.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

And it made me realize that the way I was picturing my own identity was too limited. Who is that person, born around 1710 in **Malaysia** and how did their DNA end up in my veins? Did a slave ship detour? Were they just dark skinned enough that the slave master could care less that they weren't "BLACK". And then it hit me

(beat Slave Master pops up)

(MORE)

SULTAN (CONT'D)

Have I been praying for him the whole time? A slave master. Some rapist? Has he been benefiting from all the good that I do?

Sultan stares the **Slavemaster** in the face. Later he turns to police officer and then soldier. They float just above Sultan's head.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

And is he watching me from up there? Does he hope that I do good in the world? Does he hope that I forgive him? Is he getting blessing right now from you all thinking something new?

**Energy balls** come from all over the room and enter the **slavemaster**.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

And how can I approach some form of reconciliation with a modern version of him (officer) if I can't forgive the version of him that lives within me?

The **slavemaster** looks at him tearfully. He stares back with the same look. Then he looks to the crowd.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

Are you still with me? Now the logic gets more personal and trickier. There is another **Hadeeth** that says, Narrated from **'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood** that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "No one will enter Paradise in whose heart is an atom's weight of arrogance and no one will enter Hell in whose heart is an atom's weight of faith."

Animation reflects this notion. Maybe **hadith** words float in the air. The next verse floats in the air too.

## SULTAN (CONT'D)

Regardless of where you stand in the faith continuum, you can acknowledge the conundrum this puts me in as a Muslim. For it is said that no one is a true believer until he wants for his brother what he wants for himself. So if I want paradise, but I can't get there with arrogance in my heart. And I should want him to have paradise too. Which means that I should willingly forgive.... Should willingly love him despite his regular attempts to destroy me.

At this point the slave master, the **Napoleon**, **The soldier**, and **the cop** all pop up.

## SULTAN (CONT'D)

And as I struggled to reconcile this I was trying to put it in words. But I don't think that medium is enough. So I've constructed this experience and the **VR app** that will allow others to replicate it, as a way to commune with notions that aren't easily articulated with words. But we can heal through dance.

The pianist starts singing once upon a December.

## PIANIST

Dancing bears, painted wings, things I almost remember. And a song someone sings once upon a December.

As he sings these lyrics, a micro story is created for each ancestor. Their narratives seem to follow them as they walk past and around Sultan who stands in the center and dances around with the ancestors.

Mama Cindy, the Indian, leads a group of people through the woods on what seems to be a long journey.



There are horse drawn wagons, little children. They occasionally stop around a fire. As she walks, vines with purple flowers seem to mark the journey she travels.

PIANIST (CONT'D)

Someone holds me safe and warm....

Emma is a village woman. There isn't much food in their area so she goes around feeding the hungry and stretching the food to make it last for everyone. She's constantly figuring out a puzzle. As she travels, she leaves bread crumbs everywhere.

PIANIST (CONT'D)

Horses prance through a silver storm.

Dan Williams is an old African man. He works by translating things from one group to another. He has a medium for everyone. He can communicate across distance. He is also a healer. In finding ways to communicate, he heals.

PIANIST (CONT'D)

Figures dancing gracefully, across my memory.

Papa Tuck is a European soldier. He is on a quest. His body's movements show multiple forms of expression. He is like a sexy Don Juan and always trying to figure out something. He represents equity, but a search for it, not necessarily finding it. He's like a scientist in a lab, measuring things out. He is a soldier that is fighting for what's right but failing constantly and perhaps doing more damage than he realizes.

PIANIST (CONT'D)

Far away, long ago, glowing dim as an ember. Things my heart used to know. Once upon a December.

All of these elements were then brought together on May 16<sup>th</sup> for an “Playtest” of what we had made. Though there were several technical difficulties, it served as the first iteration of what would become the full interactive documentary performance. The event itself also served as a learning opportunity about the HIPE methodology. In particular, the concept of time became a factor. We were, in retrospect, breaking our own rule of giving the flower the time it needed to bloom and instead were trying to force the full incubation period to fit into the arbitrary deadline of a semester. This was perhaps driven more by ego than a sincere cultivation of the design process. However, one could argue that in providing the necessary lesson not to rush the process, it also organically stays within the HIPE design bounds. Even writing this document was a type of battle to have peace with everything that worked and didn’t work for the May 16<sup>th</sup> event but also with regard to my larger goals at MIT. This quest for internal peace led to the second “I” in HIPE being changed from Intuitive to Iterative. This also led to the development of the nomenclature “i3” to articulate that if we make the ultimate design of the thing the priority, then the need to hit real world deadlines forces a type of punctuation that ends that particular iteration. So one isn’t promising that something is complete, but rather articulating that level of completeness it has reached by the time of the punctuation ending that particular iteration.

Finally the last addition to the Realizistance (i3) is this written document. It attempts to show the evolution of thought and design practice that led to the creation of the HIPE design methodology and the Black (w)Hole- SCi52 interactive documentary. It uses personal reflection about emotional states and puts that in context with the design (Holistic). It gives power to instincts and attempts to honor familiar and ancestral narratives as well as spiritual and community-driven values (Instinct-driven). It listens to the surrounding environment and adjusts to the positive forces of X and QW while also staying in conversation with the responses (NF) of disruption (Iterative).

And through the addition of new technology and new people and processes as the design of the Realizistance tool continues, it leaves space for growth and further development even after this document is long forgotten (Project Evolution). One just needs to retain the hunger to keep iterating. For me, hunger has never been an issue. After all, my thesis question began with hunger.

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