CULTURAL TACTICS

By Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lobenstine

MAY 2016
# Cultural Tactics

By Kenneth Bailey and Lori Lohenstine

## Table of Contents

### Part 1: Culture as the Policy of the Irrational

1. Introduction
2. The Symbol and the Thing
3. Freedom Inc.’s Night Garden
4. Tactic 1: Playing with “the Symbol and the Thing”
5. Freedom Inc.’s Night Garden

### Part 2: Exploring Three Cultural Tactics for Creating Change

1. Introduction
2. Tactic 1: Playing with “the Symbol and the Thing”
3. Freedom Inc.’s Night Garden
4. Tactic 2: Amplifying the Unspoken
5. Making the Normal Strange—the Grill Project
6. Tactic 3: Productive Fictions
7. Mockus and the Mimes

### Part 3: Two Case Studies in Using Cultural Tactics

1. Case Study 1: Addressing State Sanctioned Violence Against the Black Community
   - The Symbol and the Thing: Directing our Gaze
     - Idea #1: The Salem Witch Trials
     - Idea #2: Police Violence as Public Epidemic
2. Case Study 2: Place-identity and Struggle in Detroit
   - The Symbol and the Thing: Water in Detroit
     - 1) Council of Canadians Donates Water to U.S.
     - 2) United Nations pronounces Detroit water situation as a violation of human rights
   - Amplifying the Unspoken: “Columbusing” Detroit
   - Productive Fiction: Beware of the Dandelions

### Conclusion: The Work Ahead

1. Trickster vs. Warrior
2. The Stance
3. Design and Diverse Perspectives

### Endnotes
Part 1: Culture As the Policy of the Irrational

At DS4SI, we believe that culture is the policy of the irrational. We thought of this in the context of working with many activists who fight for (and against) formal policies all the time: policies around education, food, immigration, policing, etc. While these kinds of policies and laws may shape many aspects of our lives—mandatory schooling for children, minimum wage laws, our rights to free speech, etc.—elements of culture shape more things than we can count. It shapes so many decisions that we make constantly—what we wear, what we eat, how we talk. It’s there when we choose where to send our children to school, and it’s there when policymakers decide what is important to teach them; it’s there when we decide what kind of job we want, and it’s there when employers decide who to hire; it’s there when we speak out, and when people decide whether to listen to us or arrest us or ignore us.

When we think about culture and its various roles in our lives, we make a distinction between “Capital-C Culture,” which includes ethnicities, traditions, practices, and all that come with them, and small-c culture, which is less grounded in deep history and more about local, everyday culture. One could think of Capital-C Culture as having the strong deep roots of a large redwood tree, while small-c culture is more akin to jewelweed, with shallow roots but rapid expansion due to a dynamic seed-popping system. Capital-C Culture might explain what your family eats on holidays (not to mention what holidays you celebrate, if any), while small-c culture might dictate where your neighborhood goes to eat on Friday nights.

As we think about creating social change, we recognize that complex social problems are embedded in—and informed by—both Capital-C and small-c cultures. We assume that people make choices based on logic, but it’s clear that there are many other forces at play—other shared motives, beliefs, and passions that are all part of what constitutes social problems. For example, as we look at the many recent episodes of state sanctioned violence against Black men and boys, we see elements of Capital-C Culture, such as race and gender, in the police’s belief in the Black male body as a threat. We also see small-c culture in the ways that police of color are expected to “bleed blue” throughout these incidents and conversations and the ways that white activists get paralyzed by their own issues around race and privilege.

When we begin to look at how frequently humans make irrational decisions, we begin to understand the power of culture. And we don’t just mean this in an individuated, everyday-decisions kind of way. In fact, we are reminded that while society tends to approach democracy (and its tools for formal policymaking) with a frame of rationality, culture and the irrational decisions that it yields are as powerful there as elsewhere. For example, the many conflicts between President Obama and Republicans are frequently presented to us as rational, political arguments based on real content that matters to the country. But if we think about a situation like the government shutdowns a couple years ago, President Obama’s belief in rational argument did not help any more than if he had worn a Cat in the Hat costume and called the House and the Senate “Thing 1” and “Thing 2”.

As we explore alternative ways of creating social change, we are reminded of sociologist Jurgen Habermas’ belief that evidence and rational thought yield only agreed-upon solutions. To create real change, we need to move beyond the rational and agreed upon. This paper presents some of our cultural tactics for getting at, playing with, even amplifying some of the complexities of culture in order to solve—or at least dissect—complex social problems.
PART 2: EXPLORING THREE CULTURAL TACTICS FOR CREATING CHANGE

DS4SI works with artists to find new ways of exploring and exposing the nuances of culture—working with their skills in the realms of the symbolic, the unspoken and the possible. By doing so, we aim for a better understanding of how people, communities, and cultures make and act upon collective meaning. Understanding these aspects of social life makes it possible to work within them as a points of leverage for social change. Here are three of the cultural tactics we use:

TACTIC 1: PLAYING WITH “THE SYMBOL AND THE THING”

People, communities and cultures use symbols to make collective meaning, including agreements around desires and aversions, practices and taboos. For example, sagging your pants is as relevant in the symbolic universe of certain young people as wearing a suit and tie is to the symbolic universe of certain adults. Both practices “make sense” and provide meaning within their symbolic world. Not paying attention to the symbolic means that we frequently put too much emphasis on the rational, underestimating the power of symbolism and cultural meaning.

“The symbol and the thing” refers to when we can point to something—a gesture, item, infrastructure, habit, etc.—that operates on both the symbolic and literal levels. By being both a symbol and a real thing, it becomes something we can point to, play with, amplify or make strange. For example, a local artist in Boston, Soledad Boyd, was looking at ways to expose how gentrification was impacting her Roxbury neighborhood. She noticed that new South End Parking signs had gone up across from our Roxbury-based Studio. She is currently exploring how these signs symbolize the encroachment of the South End on Roxbury and playing with how she might use this literal thing—the sign—to raise awareness. What if she made fake South End Parking signs and put them up all over Roxbury? Or the reverse?

It is useful to note that a symbol may be pulled from the context at play—like the parking signs—or it may be pulled from another context, with the very unexpectedness of its usage serving as a powerful metaphor. For example, the AIDS quilt began in 1985 when young AIDS activist Cleve Jones was inspired to use the symbol of the quilt to commemorate and make human the many people who died from AIDS. After helping hang a “patchwork” of posters with the names of AIDS victims, he recalls:

As I looked at that I thought it looked like some kind of odd quilt. And when I said the word quilt to myself, I thought of my grandma and great grandma, and it seemed like such a middle-American, traditional, family values sort of symbol. And I thought, what a perfect symbol to attach to this disease that’s killing homosexuals and African Americans and IV drug users. So that was the idea. I could see how it would work as therapy for people who were grieving. I could see how it would work for the media to understand the lives behind the statistics, and as a weapon to shame the government for its inaction.

His idea of a growing quilt, one that could be added to by anyone who wanted to commemorate the life of a loved one who had died from AIDS, became the AIDS Memorial Quilt—now a worldwide creation with almost 50,000 panels.
Part 2: Exploring Three Cultural Tactics for Creating Change

TACTIC 2:
AMPLIFYING THE UNSPOKEN

Much of the power of culture comes from the unspoken. While legal policy is written and has every word inspected for loopholes, culture (as the policy of the irrational) goes largely unspoken, unwritten and uninspected. When do we stop to wonder why there are outdoor basketball courts but not dance courts, or even how those basketball courts seem to have an invisible sign that says “boys only”? When do we ask how car culture created roads that are free, while subways and buses cost money? Or why our culture’s beliefs about childhood have led to schools that sort children by exact age, rather than knowledge, interest or learning style? If we are to create fundamental social change, we have to inspect deep-seated social beliefs. We need tactics that help populations unpack their assumptions about daily life and expose how the very same collective behaviors they are trying to change are embedded in these assumptions.

By finding ways to amplify the unspoken, we are able to help populations engage and work with underlying belief systems and what is and isn’t rational—or at least useful—within them.

We can create the kinds of room necessary for people, communities and institutions to be changeable. Oftentimes amplifying the unspoken is done through a social intervention designed in conjunction with identifying “the symbol and the thing”. For example, the South End Parking sign in Roxbury was the symbol Boyd used to represent gentrification, but Boyd’s future steps to use mock South End parking signs across Roxbury (or mock Roxbury parking signs across the South End) would amplify all the unspoken tensions between the neighborhoods. It would also be an intervention that could be replicated and folded back into a much-needed citywide discourse.

In 2012, DS4SI led its first Action Lab for a conference called Roots and Remedies, held in New Orleans. (Sponsored by The Praxis Project, Roots and Remedies brought together hundreds of social justice activists from around the country.) An Action Lab is a space where participants get a hands-on chance to learn about and generate cultural tactics that support their organizing strategies.

A set of activists from Freedom Inc. in Madison, WI, joined us and used the Lab to dig into how they could support some of their youth in flipping the powerlessness and shame they felt as survivors of incest, sexual assault and domestic violence. By using both linear and nonlinear design tools, they came upon the symbol of a local plant that grows in darkness. To amplify this symbol, they began to design an intervention in which the youth would plant and tend a “night garden,” gaining confidence and leadership as they realized their own power to grow and flourish, even in challenging circumstances.

THE SYMBOL OF THE NIGHT GARDEN

In 2012, DS4SI led its first Action Lab for a conference called Roots and Remedies, held in New Orleans. (Sponsored by The Praxis Project, Roots and Remedies brought together hundreds of social justice activists from around the country.) An Action Lab is a space where participants get a hands-on chance to learn about and generate cultural tactics that support their organizing strategies.

A set of activists from Freedom Inc. in Madison, WI, joined us and used the Lab to dig into how they could support some of their youth in flipping the powerlessness and shame they felt as survivors of incest, sexual assault and domestic violence. By using both linear and nonlinear design tools, they came upon the symbol of a local plant that grows in darkness. To amplify this symbol, they began to design an intervention in which the youth would plant and tend a “night garden,” gaining confidence and leadership as they realized their own power to grow and flourish, even in challenging circumstances.
Any youth in Boston (and beyond) will tell you, if someone “looks at you wrong” or “grills you”, you have to glare back. Despite the fact that this often leads to unwanted violence, it is considered not just normal, but virtually mandatory. We were intrigued by the grill’s almost universal power to demand escalation, and we decided to try to amplify this unspoken rule by making it strange.

With the help of our artist-in-residence, Judith Leemann, our summer youth interns used both humor and surprise to surreptitiously amplify and question the assumed responses to being grilled. At a barbecue with 70 teens, the interns facilitated a grill game that demanded participants not smile when grilled. Though the players had probably never had the urge to smile when grilled, suddenly it was almost irresistible. For their second intervention, they went out into the streets and asked teens to give them their “best grill,” as they posed holding a life-size Polaroid frame. We left participants to make their own sense of the point being made, wondering if perhaps the next time they were grilled their hostility might get sidetracked admiring a good grill or just thinking of our strange intervention.

### TACTIC 3: PRODUCTIVE FICTIONS

We use what we call “productive fictions” to create glimpses into what might be in the world we want, and build micro-spaces where that world already exists.

A tricky example of a productive fiction was proposed by Brazilian artist Tiago Gualberto. He was responding to the massive Inhotim Art Museum opening in 2006, just kilometers away. "Making the Normal Strange - The Grill Project"
from his mother’s home in impoverished Igarape, Brazil. The 5000 acre museum and botanical garden is largely funded by former mining magnate Bernardo Paz. Meanwhile, his hometown struggles with iron ore polluting their water and fields. Seizing on both the symbol of the iron ore and a popular local custom of selling homemade ice pops called “chupchups”, he created a design for mixing iron ore and cement in the shape of the chupchups and broadcast that they were to be souvenirs of Inhotim. Suddenly and without their blessing, Inhotim was connected with a symbol that worked on so many levels (including the inside joke that “chupchup” is slang for “suck it”.)

We are not suggesting that these cultural tactics are the only ones available, just that they are three ways we’ve found to be effective at teasing out some of the deeply rooted assumptions and beliefs that complex problems are bound up in. They can use humor or horror, spectacle or subtlety, but in each case they invite the public into a new perspective on itself and the problem at hand. They do not necessarily offer a solution, but in pushing the public into new conversations with itself, they aim to pose new questions, new points of leverage for change, and new lines of flight.

Mockus and the Mimes

“Traffic mime” in action as part of Mayor Antanas Mockus’ civil society intervention in the mid-1990s.

A philosophy professor and president of the National University of Columbia, Antanas Mockus was elected to be the mayor of Bogota in the late 1990s and again in the early 2000s. He is perhaps best known outside of Columbia as the mayor who hired 420 mimes to replace his traffic cops. This might be the largest scale productive fiction we’ve heard of! When Mockus talks about the impetus for this intervention in the city, he talks about his desire to build a sense of trust in the power of collective agreements. He wanted to give the people of Bogota an example of how following laws could actually benefit individuals and the city at large.

After hearing from traffic police and government advisors that there was nothing to do about the city’s traffic chaos, Mockus fired his traffic cops and gave artists their jobs. With humor and teasing—rather than tickets and bribes—the system of street mimes as traffic facilitators created a productive fiction that represented another way of being in public and being together. It invited another kind of citizen-to-citizen accountability, one that ultimately started the shift in Bogota’s larger civic culture.
PART 3: TWO CASE STUDIES IN USING CULTURAL TACTICS

Cultural tactics can be used in a variety of ways. In this section we’ll use two case studies to explore how cultural tactics can be used to:

1. **Take on a specific, complex and sturdy problem—in this case, state-sanctioned violence against the black community.**

2. **Think about a particular geography and the complexities within it—in this case taking on how Detroit is currently existing as a test case for post-industrial capitalism.**

In each case study we will pose some existing and imagined cultural tactics and explore where they might take us in our search for solutions.

### CASE STUDY 1: ADDRESSING STATE SANCTIONED VIOLENCE AGAINST THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Over the course of the past few years, the intense forms of violence the black community has experienced from both police and vigilante culture has been more visible and more talked about than at any time since the Civil Rights Movement. Activists are using the term “state-sanctioned violence” to capture the depth and breadth of the problem, with staggering numbers like the statistic that young black men were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police officers in 2015.4

“In the most talked about cases of late —Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice—the white gaze upon the black body is distorted to a point of irrationality.”

In the most talked about cases of late —Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner and Tamir Rice—the white gaze upon the black body is distorted to a point of irrationality. This particularly deadly distortion of rationality exists on two levels: one having to do with what is true versus what is seen/assumed—for example, the white gaze often assuming young black men are older than they really are (and therefore in their minds more dangerous), and the second having to do with the complex history and current status of how the white gaze equals the juridical gaze. (The irony here, is that with its white, juridical gaze, the state is far more dangerous to the black body than vice versa.) As the New York Times reported on FBI Director James B. Comey’s address to students at Georgetown University in February, 2015: “Mr. Comey said that some officers scrutinize African-Americans more closely using a mental shortcut that ‘becomes almost irresistible and maybe even rational by some lights’ because black men are arrested at much higher rates than white men.” With circular logic like this, the white gaze reinforces itself as synonymous with the law, truth and power, while reinforcing blackness as synonymous with danger, menace and criminality. Let’s look at American philosopher Judith Butler’s treatment of the white gaze in excerpts from a January, 2015 interview in the New York Times:

“The police see a threat when there is no gun to see, or someone is subdued and crying out for his life, when they are moving away or cannot move. These figures are perceived as threats even when they do not threaten, when they have no weapon, and the video footage that shows precisely this is taken to be a ratification of the police’s perception. The perception is then ratified as a public perception at which point we not only must insist on the dignity of black lives, but name the racism that has become ratified as public perception.”

What we hear in Butler’s treatment is a perversion of the visual: in the eyes of the white juridical gaze, the black body is always
already guilty. Which begs the question of the trial in the first place. The black body exists on the outskirts of the law where beliefs, mumbo jumbo and the phantasmal are as likely to take hold of a court (or grand jury) as the summoning of sanctioned and rational techniques like presenting evidence, interviewing witnesses and expecting fair judgment based on these.

So what can be done about this? We see here a perversion of the visual, rooted in centuries of Capital-C and small-c culture, a perversion that both reinforces and is reinforced by the status quo. If the white gaze is always the juridical gaze and if the black body is always the criminalized body...how do we interrupt this cultural conundrum? Let's look at our cultural tactics:

1) The Symbol and the Thing: Directing our Gaze

In the case of state-sanctioned violence against the black community, familiar symbols have too often pointed our gaze back at the black body—the hoodie of Trayvon Martin being the most memorable example here. In many of these cases, the specific victim—his clothes, his words, his name—becomes the symbol. It's powerful, but flawed. It keeps us too narrowly involved in the specific situation (even when it resonates around the world), and it too often makes the discussion about the moral character of the individual. We need to develop the kind of symbol that directs our collective gaze at the institutions involved, rather than either the victim or the perpetrator.

Idea #1: The Salem Witch Trials

To point to the problem as the perversion of the visual, we might use a symbol like the Salem Witch Trials--another time with a historical parallel of mixing the juridical and the phantasmal. We could point to the similarities in techniques used between the witch trials and the grand juries, for example, or the similarities in who was always seen as guilty and who was always seen as innocent.

Idea #2: Police Violence as Public Epidemic

Since police violence against young black men is rising as one of the fastest killers of this population, we could take steps similar to other steps taken by public health professionals against other killers like AIDS, diabetes and ebola. Large billboards could be put up reminding black communities to avoid dangerous behaviors like growing tall, walking, reaching for your phone or driving. Citizens at risk of police violence could be encouraged to take safety precautions, perhaps to wear protective outfits when dealing with police, like those used to prevent the deadly spread of ebola. Or in extreme cases, police forces that have proven to be particularly deadly—like those in Los Angeles, Houston, New York, Phoenix, and San Francisco—could be quarantined for the health of the public. All of these cultural tactics would shift the understanding of what is dangerous to the white juridical gaze and its corresponding state-sanctioned violence, rather than the victims of that violence. (Interestingly, less dramatic elements of this approach are actually starting. In a recent essay in the online medical journal PLOS Medicine, Harvard scientists proposed that “law-enforcement–related deaths be treated as a notifiable condition, which would allow public health departments to report these data in real-time, at the local as well as national level, thereby providing data needed to understand and prevent the problem.” Their logic stemmed from their belief that “these events involve mortality and affect the well-being of the families and communities of the deceased; therefore, law-enforcement–related deaths are public health data, not solely criminal justice data.”)
Barrington Edwards, a Boston-based artist and art teacher who was a 2015 ExpressingBoston Public Art Fellow with the Studio, has been exploring the medium of sculpture and puppetry to get at the amplified, irrational fear of the black man. By creating a larger-than-life wearable black puppet, he represented how black men are always already seen as towering and therefore menacing. His character, Effingee, innocently roamed the streets of Boston (complete with an online backstory, studiovexer.blogspot.com). Effingee amplified and made strange people’s unspoken fear of black men, a fear that is most deadly to the feared themselves. As Barrington explains, “I approached this vexing social paradigm from the point of view of a satirist and storyteller. I chose this tactic because of the absurdity of the reasoning that keeps coming up to rationalize the violence against the perceived threat of black men and boys. I intended for the piece to be layered and deep but cumbersome and ridiculous on the surface. I wanted the narrative to evolve and include the people who Effingee encountered. I held only one voice and perspective but tried to give voice to many stakeholders through Effingee’s narrative.”

3) Productive Fiction: Changing the USA Lookbook

With the recent cases of grand juries declining to charge police (even in the face of stark video evidence), it is clear that just as cops have predetermined that certain bodies are always already guilty, the other legal grooves are already organized to the visual regime of police as truth-tellers. At the Studio, we are putting out the productive fiction that this collusion of state-sanctioned violence was part of the U.S.A.’s 2015 Lookbook. (For those not familiar with lookbooks, they are hyper-stylized tools of the fashion industry to show off brands’ new “looks” for the upcoming season.) With 2015 behind us, we can imagine that new ways of policing—or not-policing—will be in style in 2016. Each page of our U.S.A. 2016 Lookbook is a chance to suggest a new productive fiction: ideas for how new social agreements, architectural structures, “grandma escorts”, interventionists, etc., could create new options that keep communities safe—with and without police.

None of these ideas are in and of themselves expected to do the trick. But the work of reconfiguring this problem will require these kinds of approaches and more if we are to get at the stuff functioning in the collective unconscious of white supremacy, even in this cultural rendition of fear. At a time when not even video footage of police killing unarmed black men and boys can convince a grand jury to request a trial, we would be naïve to expect policies like police wearing video cameras to do the trick. If the perversion of the white gaze on the black body is still the juridical safe haven for police, we must go after that broader, cultural irrationality as much as we go after individual cops or police departments at large. We must find and use strategies that question that racist gaze, that point to who is really in danger, and perhaps also help us question policing itself as a public safety strategy.
There are stories that a place has about itself, both within the place and beyond. Detroit, MI, has a density of narratives, both locally and around the world. It is the Motor City, the home of Motown music and Afro-futurism, the symbol of post-industrial collapse and of hipster frontierism. One of Detroit’s greatest philosophers, revolutionaries and visionaries, Grace Lee Boggs, passed away in 2015. When we think about using cultural tactics to frame and amplify the stories, contradictions and resources in Detroit right now, we can start with her ongoing hope for her adopted hometown, based on its constant ability to reimagine itself:

“I think one of the things that I discovered after I came to Detroit…is that you have to make a way out of no way. As I began looking out the window here in Detroit, when I came here in ’53, there were 2 million Detroiters, the place was just booming. My husband’s plant, Chrysler, employed 17,000 workers. And after that, because of the technology introduced during the World War, the plant was automated and began employing 2,000 workers and, instead of booming, the neighborhood began being pockmarked with vacant lots….When most people looked at vacant lots and saw only dead cats and old mattresses and rubber tires, and these women particularly who had been raised down South and had grown food calling themselves the Gardening Angels …[they] began to connect with young people and show them what it was like to grow gardens and grow food and reconnect the young people with the earth, with a whole new way of thinking about life and culture.

You know, we have in Detroit, what we call the City of Hope….We call Detroit a City of Hope and that began to change the way we looked at reality and Detroiter looked at themselves. Isn’t it wonderful what naming something can do?”

On one scale, Detroit itself is the symbol of America’s post-industrial, privatized future. For neoliberalism, the “rebirth” of Detroit would symbolize the victory of the private sector over the public sector in running a city, regardless of how that reborn city treats its vulnerable populations. To this end, the city is on its way to privatizing its largest resource—water. But water is a powerful symbol. According to the United Nations, access to safe, drinkable water is a human right. Activists in Detroit have seized on water as the most poignant symbol in their fight against both the privatization of Detroit and the mistreatment of its most vulnerable residents. For example, the People’s Water Board—a coalition that advocates for access, protection, and conservation of Detroit’s water—activated the symbol of water as an international human right in two powerful ways:

1) Council of Canadians Donates Water to U.S.

Maude Barlow, chair of the Council of Canadians, was appalled when she heard that Detroit was shutting off water to tens of thousands of Detroit homes, especially in the heat of the summer. “I’ve seen this in the poorest countries in the world,” Barlow said. “This is what we call failed states, but to see this in North America, it’s a disgrace….We’re sitting on the Great Lakes, supplying a fifth of the world’s surface water. It’s appalling.” In response, she helped plan and lead a water convoy bringing what she called “good Canadian, public, clean water” across the river to Detroit on July 24th, 2014. “Our water is their water,” Barlow said. While the brigade didn’t muster enough water to literally keep Detroiter going for long, it did something symbolic. It framed the United States as a country in need of aid—a role that the US never sees itself in. It framed Detroit’s failure to provide safe drinking water to its citizens as an international relief issue, rather than a city’s budget issue or political choice. Which helped lead to the engagement of the United Nations the next day…
2) United Nations pronounces Detroit water situation as a violation of human rights

On June 25th, 2014, the day after Canada’s donation of fresh water to Detroit, the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights posted this on their website: “Three UN experts on the human rights to water and sanitation, adequate housing, and extreme poverty and human rights expressed concern Wednesday about reports of widespread water disconnections in the US city of Detroit of households unable to pay water bills. ‘Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights,’ the experts said.

‘Disconnections due to non-payment are only permissible if it can be shown that the resident is able to pay but is not paying. In other words, when there is genuine inability to pay, human rights simply forbids disconnections,’ said Catarina de Albuquerque, the expert on the human right to water and sanitation.”

Once again, the U.S.—a country that likes to see itself as an international champion for human rights—was finding itself on the wrong side of the equation. And although pronouncements are symbolic almost by definition, Detroit citizens and water justice activists had another international symbol of the profound significance of Detroit’s decision to shut off water to thousands of its most vulnerable citizens.

Amplifying the Unspoken: “Columbusing” Detroit

When legendary Detroiter Grace Lee Boggs referred to Detroit as “the City of Hope”, she meant a new way for residents to think of each other and their city. However, this idea that Detroit is a place to re-imagine oneself is entangled with the question of who matters (who gets to do the imagining) and who Detroit is for. As YES! Magazine underscored in 2011, lots of folks are getting in on the action:

“Detroit, for all its problems—or perhaps because of them—has become nothing less than a new American frontier. Once, easterners heeded the call to “Go West, young man,” to leave behind the comforts and sophistication of the established citadels in search

of adventure and fortune and to tame this great continent. Now, that same whisper is starting to build around Detroit.”

Initiatives like “Move Detroit 11/11/11”, have forwarded this frontier notion, with opportunities to “tame” Detroit with legions of young entrepreneurial hipsters.

Detroit—like America before it—is in the position of being discovered (and even colonized) despite its existing population. Which brings us to the term Columbusing, popularly used to describe “the art of discovering something that is not new”14. Or as Oakland filmmaker N’Jeri Eaton explained, “Columbusing
is the assumption it wasn’t worth having a particular thing until a certain group of people discovered it.”  

So how could Detroitors amplify the unspoken? Eaton took a stab at it in Oakland when she dressed as Christopher Columbus on a return flight from New York City. She began her mission to “discover” Oakland — its fresh pho, art galleries, neighborhoods, etc. — and documented her travels on Instagram.

In Detroit the “Columbusing” and frontier framework could be amplified in a number of ways, including:

- As comedian Eddie Izzard once said, “England stole countries with the cunning use of flags.” Perhaps Detroitors could update or redesign their city flag and use it as a symbol that their city is not to be taken over or colonized.

- Speaking of humorists, a 2014 collegehumor.com skit entitled “Columbusing: Discovering Things for White People” might give us a hint for an intervention. When a white friend shamelessly “discovers” his favorite bar, the black lead actor points to a sign showing it’s been around since 1935. Perhaps Detroitors could tag establishments around town with stickers or posters that warn “No Columbusing”.

- Detroitors could take advantage of Columbus Day to do an anti-colonization action, working in partnership with the local Native American populations.
Imagine a productive fiction in which participants step into a future world, a world that literally surrounds them on all sides, since it is projected onto a 400 square foot polyhedron dome-like pod structure. Complex Movements of Detroit has accomplished this through their Beware of the Dandelions installation, which creates an immersive visual and sound experience that incorporates science-fiction, projections, songs, and interactive game elements. Once in the pod, the audience becomes a community of post-apocalyptic survivors working together in an immersive environment rich in visual imagery, performance, and a soundscape based on the modern musical influences of Detroit. Interactive elements allow audience members to unlock and shape their experience. In the end, Beware of the Dandelions functions as part performance, part community organizing workshop space, and part visual arts exhibition. As a moving installation, it has traveled to Seattle, Dallas, and even Johannesburg, bringing its unique Detroit-flavored and interactive productive fiction to activists around the world.¹⁸
CONCLUSION

THE WORK AHEAD

It’s very useful—if one is new to trying cultural tactics—to understand the differences between these tactics and the traditional tactics of social justice work. The diverse approaches needed to come up with, carry out and even assess cultural tactics might come naturally to you or they might seem rather strange. Coming up with cultural tactics requires different mindsets, stances and skills. We think of it this way:

**Trickster vs. Warrior**

The work of imagining cultural tactics is the work of the trickster. Tricksters operate in liminal spaces—betwixt and between; as author Lewis Hyde describes, tricksters are “the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox”.19 That said, most social justice work looks more like the work of the warrior—straight ahead, with clear (policy) battles to fight and enemies to target. So as activists, we tend to be at a cognitive deficiency for imagining trickier kinds of attempts to create social change. We need to be willing to find our inner trickster, to seek out trickster perspectives and open ourselves up to surprise. We need our trickster allies—be they artists, children, or hustlers—to help us find the way out of no way, the power of the gesture, the joke or the con.

**The Stance**

Related to our warrior work is our warrior stance. That is, our issues and work tend to make us tense and serious. We’re fighting tremendous injustices—and often losing—so our stance can run from depressed to mad as hell, and in either case, we feel like a solution is needed so urgently that we can’t afford to fail. These emotional stances aren’t necessarily the ones we need to imagine cultural tactics. To get there we need to step out of our urgency and into the pace of everyday life. We need to listen to what our members are saying, not just about the problem, but about where they went last Friday night, how their kids are on their last nerve, how they make the best dumplings in the neighborhood, etc. The best ideas for cultural tactics tend to come from these less emotionally tight conversations. It’s the urgent practice of organizing that often impedes our ability to tap into the side of ourselves and others where good cultural tactics can be generated.

**Design and Diverse Perspectives**

Another reason to let go of our constant urgency is that good design thinking takes time, and the work of figuring out where to enter into the cultural sphere requires time and diverse perspectives. In order to figure out good potential cultural tactics, we tend to think with artists, scholars and residents of all ages and locations vis a vis the problem at hand. Since cultural tactics are based on relevant cultural norms (those tricky, irrational “policies”), it is critical to take the time to understand how the norms of your community relate to the issue and embed it in daily life. This is what the design world calls terrain research, and it’s critical work, even when we think we know the terrain like the backs of our hands. At DS4SI, we do it through observation as well as conversations, either loose and free flowing or more facilitated. If you want to incorporate cultural tactics into your repertoire for creating social change, you need to be willing to incorporate a commitment to design research and a willingness to listen to a diverse set of thinkers.

In the end, we believe that we will get to social justice only if we commit to working in multiple ways. Yes, we need organizing, we need advocacy, we need protest—we need to put pressure on our government to defend (and not attack) its most vulnerable populations, we need to point out gross injustice on behalf of our courts, our corporations, etc. But we also need cultural tactics that help us sniff out and untangle when complex problems are enmeshed in the irrational elements of daily assumptions and daily living. We need to work with artists, tricksters and design thinkers to find new ways of exploring and exposing the nuances of culture—working with their skills in the realms of the symbolic, the unspoken and the possible. We believe including cultural tactics in our social justice work can make it more effective, more widespread, and more fun.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.


Douglas, Cedric. Effingee at night with youth. 3 June 2015. Photograph.


The Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI) is dedicated to changing how social justice is imagined, developed and deployed here in the United States.

www.ds4si.org

Kenneth Bailey | kdb@ds4si.org
Lori Lobenstine | lori@ds4si.org