

## Redesigning the field

**Lesley-Ann Noel (ncsu, Estados Unidos)**  
lmnoel@ncsu.edu

## Redesigning the field

**Abstract:** This essay is written from the keynote speech delivered at the P&D conference in 2022. In this speech, Lesley-Ann Noel emphasizes how designers can use their practice to promote social change by sharing emancipatory research principles and examples from her own research and practice

**Keywords:** Design activism; emancipatory research; design for social change.

## *O desenho do campo*

**Resumo:** *Este ensaio foi escrito a partir da palestra realizada na conferência P&D em 2022. Neste discurso, Lesley-Ann Noel enfatiza como os designers podem utilizar sua prática para promover a mudança social, compartilhando princípios de pesquisa emancipatória e exemplos de sua própria pesquisa e prática.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Design ativista; pesquisa emancipatória; design para mudança social*

First of all, I was very intrigued by the name of this conference, *O desenho do campo* or *The design of the field*. Does it mean the design of field work, or does it mean the design of the field? For this reason, I named my speech *Redesigning the field* in honor of this conference theme. After reading, I hope that you will also consider redesigning the field that we are in, the field of design.

As an initial question, are you an activist or are you a researcher? This is a question that one of my professors posed to me during my PhD and I did not understand the binary nature involved in it. Were activism and research mutually exclusive? Yes, the professor said, you cannot do good research if it defends a specific agenda. This statement terrified me because I have an agenda, and many of us do too. The difference is that some of us probably declare our agendas more clearly than others.

I want to start off this talk discussing positionality. I start with positionality in pretty much every conversation I have because I think it is the sum of our identities grounds who we are.. So, I want to give you a tiny glimpse of my positionality and a glimpse at who I am and into my worlds. Therefore, you can see and understand my agendas and how and why I bring these into the research that I do.

Talking a little about myself, I am from Trinidad and Tobago in Caribbean, and way back in the last century, I left the house of my parents in Trinidad and I came to Brazil. I spent 1992 in Bahia as a student at Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA) and the power of student action and protests that year left an indelible mark on my young mind. We students had power and agency, and we could make change. After that, I lived in Curitiba, where I was a student in Programa de Desenho Industrial da Universidade Federal do Paraná (UFPR). I probably know some of the participants of this conference since way back then. I believe I even have one of the proceedings from the very first conferences that I collected at UFPR.

My life and design practice have taken me around the world and back a few times, back to Trinidad, around the Caribbean, to Tanzania, to Uganda, to Kenya, and eventually to the United States, where I have spent time in Raleigh, North Carolina, Northern California, and New Orleans. In Brazil, where you are, I moved from Porto Alegre, to Bahia, to Curitiba. So, with all of that moving, I am hyper aware of many different ways of being, knowing and doing from having lived in all of these different places and having lived with different people and having to constantly relearn new social norms. I have been an outsider for most of my life. Even when I am at home, I feel like an outsider, and I bring this insider outsider perspective to all of the work that I do.

Change is constant, everything must change, the awareness of different ways of seeing, knowing, doing can help you to see and understand that everything can change, and nothing will remain the same. In the *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Arturo Escobar refers to the existence of a critical design studies field under construction. I want to think that I am one of a great many people, designers, students, and researchers, including many of the people at this conference who are questioning the way that we think about and do design and who are agitating for change, fast, radical, and dramatic change.

One way to achieve change is to question everything. Critical questions help to uncover where change is needed. The ability, or not, to respond to these questions can help to uncover what we do need to do. I invite you to dig into your social context, position out and examine for yourself what questions you think need to be asked and what are the principles that will guide you and your work in the future.

Definitely, my professor was wrong. You know, it feels good to say that now. She had only been exposed to positivist research, which is a research method that seeks objective truths and emphasizes experiments, controls and measurement. She did not know it is possible to adopt a social justice stance in research and we see this in the fields of critical theory, critical pedagogy, critical race theory, which seek to reveal and confront cultural and historical structures. In fact, it is possible to be critical and transformative as an academic.

It should be considered that “Critical intellectuals advocate for social justice; their teaching and research inspire others to engage in the work of material transformation” – (CANN & DEMELENNEURE, 2020 p. 13). Some days I think maybe I am this or this is what I aspire to be, the intellectual inspires others to make change. Whereas “Transformative intellectuals are truly counterhegemonic. They not only theorize about activism, but they live in solidarity with the marginalized, oppressed groups and work alongside them for the transformation of unjust social and material conditions” (CANN & DEMELENNEURE, 2020 p. 13). Transformative intellectuals are more successful in leaving the ivory towers of academia when doing their work, since academic aims and limits may sometimes get in the way of the work that is needed to create social change.

These two forms of academic or these two personas in academia, the critical intellectual and the transformative intellectual break with traditional academics who reinforce the status quo and create and maintain inequality through their work. Both of these types of academics, the critical and the transformative, spark change through ideas and action.

The Frankfurt School sought to develop theory, critical theory that could liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them. As designers, drawing inspiration from the Frankfurt School, we can legitimately ensure that our design research moves beyond more superficial solutions or understanding of issues to addressing issues in a way that actively seeks to create social change.

I can be, and you can be, a researcher with an agenda for social change. I am asking you to question the barriers that are imposed as limits and boundaries for your work. Question Everything. Examine for yourself. What are the principles that will guide your work in the future? And finally, I encourage you to seek to design social change.

Here are some of the principles that guided my doctoral research. In my research, using an emancipatory philosophy, I aim to create emancipation and social justice to correct the power imbalance in research design between the privileged researchers and their research subjects from traditionally marginalized or oppressed groups, such as the economically disadvantaged. I sought to shift power, redistribute power, and share power.

There is a West African proverb that says: “Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story”. That always encouraged me to, throughout my research, to examine whose story I was telling in the research process and to carefully consider the point of view that I wanted to support. The slogan from the disability movement “Nothing about us without us is for us” here depicted in artwork by Ricardo Levins Morales was a good reminder for me to send to the people who are impacted by research and dissent to myself as a researcher, or dissent to other stakeholders who are less impacted by what I was addressing.

The research principles from the emancipatory research paradigm assured me that I could have my agenda. I could pursue this agenda if I analyzed power inequities, if I saw the world through a prism of cultural lenses, if I recognized that knowledge is not only created by the elite researcher, if I was aware of multiple truths, if I used dialogic and dialectical methods, if the work I was doing was participatory and political, if it shifted power to those without power or with less power and if I aimed to create social action through this work.

As I mentioned, my professor was wrong. I could have an agenda. I have brought this agenda into everything that I do. I intend to show you how I have been putting these principles into practice. My work is driven by my positionality as an Afro-Caribbean, global Southern female identifying designer, who is a mother, it is also driven by some keywords that are related

to power sharing, participation, emancipation, access, and all of this combination of influences drives the work that I do.

These principles have resulted in several tools and methods, research and writing, which I share with in the hope that they may inspire you to find your guiding principles that you can use for your own research. Even if your principles seem to make you you stray from the ‘normal’ that maybe we have been told are normal, but normal encodes, right, such as objectivity, efficiency, , and norms that maintain the status quo.

## The Positionality Wheel

This is a tool to prompt reflection about the way your positionality and worldview affect the work that you do. I made this tool first for individual reflection on identity, but, I found during the pandemic that it also works well for groups. During the pandemic, when we started to use it remotely, we were able to complete the wheel anonymously and as a group and then analyze the positionality of the team and see the biases and the gaps within the team and figure out how this would affect the work that we did.

This activity encourages all participants to reflect on several facets of their identity, ranging from more visible factors like race, gender, age, to less visible elements such as ability, class, education, and even the languages that they speak.

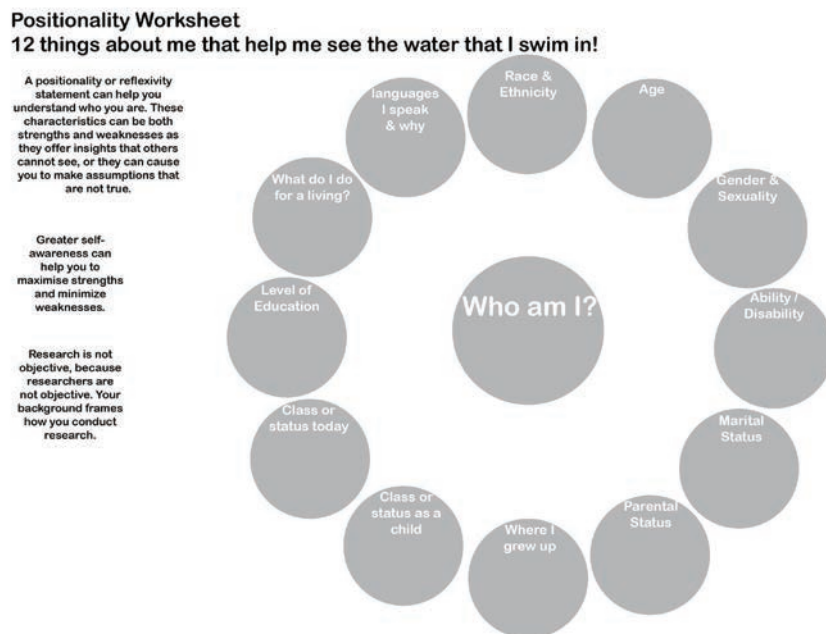


FIGURE 1. Positionality Wheel, created in 2018 to facilitate reflection on identities.



## The Designer's Critical Alphabet

*The designer's critical alphabet* grew out of my questions on how to get designers to consider many perspectives and see their own blindspots during the design process. It is a whole deck of questions that was born out of my angst and frustration at a particular time of my life when I really wanted people to ask harder questions.

It started off with three cards: critical race theory, feminist theory, and through the eyes of the child. I asked students to go and do some research. Then when they came back, I was a little bit bothered by the similarity in the people that they interviewed. These cards were meant to nudge the students to move away from the middle class or upper middle class in the research that they were doing and to consider perspectives that they might not have considered and they then would have had to, if they realized that they had no information about these perspectives, they had to figure out where were they going to do this additional research. Those three questions morphed into this entire deck and an app as well.



FIGURE 2. The Designer's Critical Alphabet

## The Good Vibes Deck

Later on, I did a second deck, *The designer's good vibes alphabet*, which is really more focused on Global South principles or what I imagined to be the Global South principles or principles related to care, abundance, gratitude, healing. When we were in this deck, and it was me seeking a more positive alphabet after doing the critical alphabet.



FIGURE 3. The Good Vibes Deck

## The Black Experience in Design

On *The Black Experience In Design*, I am one of six editors of this huge book of 595 pages about the black experience in design. We created this work with the participation of 70 designers, and we created many different ways for these contributors to participate without the usual gatekeeping that exists in publishing. The lead editor is Anne Berry, the project started with her and then she reached out to different people. Jennifer Rittner, as a development editor, Kelly Walters as creative director and Kareem Collie, Penina Acayo and I were the other three editors.



It took us 18 months to go from the start of this tiny idea in June 2020. We wrote right through the pandemic, and we launched the book February 1st, 2022. The work I think has been pretty successful, it really was born out of questions that people would ask all the time like: “Where are the black designers?”. After this book, we hope that people will never ask a question like that again. Because they are there, right? People must look harder. Each editor curated their chapter for the book. I did not want to focus on themes of exclusion. I was assigned design scholarship and then I also proposed a chapter on Afrofuturism and design and collective, radical and liberatory spaces.



FIGURE 4. The Black Experience in Design

### Pluriversal Design - Design Research Society

In addition, there is a work that I do with the Pluriversal Design Special Interest Group, which I really enjoy. I co-chair this group in the Design Research Society with one of my closest collaborators, Brazilian Canadian researcher, Dr. Renata Marques Leitão. Some days it seems like I only collaborate with Brazilians. The focus of the group is to create liberatory and radical spaces within design research to promote and create intercultural and pluralistic conversation about design. Our work aims to highlight and bring together multiple perspectives in design, including multiple epistemological

positions and forms of design, education, and practice, especially from those commonly oppressed by and excluded from mainstream design.

As part of this work, in 2020 we created the Pivot conferences, we had a second one in 2021. This was to encourage design researchers to share frame and focus research on Global South epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies. We were very rigorous in our review process, if we thought that there was too much of a single dominant narrative or epistemology or perspective in the work, we would actually, we did not reject the work outright, but we worked very closely with authors to make sure that the stories were being told from the point of view of people from the Global South.

The Volume 14, Issue 3 of *Design and Culture* has four essays from our group within the DRS, where we created a special forum around designing a world of many centers. Renata and I wrote the editorial. There is a visual essay by Nicholas and John about her work with the Aboriginal community in Australia. The essay of Renata about “From Needs to Desire” and then my “Statement of Practice” about the work that I do.

Probably the most exciting thing that we do in that work is we run a book club because we say that if you want to decolonize your work, then you cannot only be reading European and North American authors. The book club really focuses on authors from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and then we change the geographies from time to time and also ask people from the Global South to tell us what works they think that we should be reading. It has changed the way that I in particular think about ideas just because now I am reading these different authors.

I would also like to refer to my collaborations with Fred Amstel and Rodrigo Gonzatto. On two Special Issues of *Disenã Journal*, which is based in Chile. This was an exciting collaboration and the work is all available, open access in Spanish and English.

## **Other research**

I am also taking these principles into funded research. I collaborated with Dr. Alessandra Bassano, an expert in public health, where we are focusing on using design-based research methods in public health research. We also secured a contract from the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institutes to create design tool kits to help patients express their public health experience. I have been doing civic innovation work with cities in the United States for the support of the Bloomberg Centre for Public Impact and these Cities are focused on questions of equity, access, and public engagement. There are city officials working with children to get the children to approve a design that they are working on. The city is creating a series of programs.

They are doing the planning in a child centered way because we are interested in equity.

Finally, there is a engagement project in Raleigh where I live that focuses on engaging Black boys and attracting them to careers in science, technology, engineering and math through Afrofuturism games and design. At this first point I just wanted to show you that you really can have an agenda and you can bring this agenda into the work that you do despite what people might see otherwise.

## Design Social Change

Now, talking about social change, I have been discussing a lot about it and I want to share with you some excerpts of my book on designing social change.



FIGURE 5. Design Social Change book

When people sometimes ask me what I do. I often answer that I am a social studies teacher for designers. I teach a class about contemporary issues in design and the main theme is oppression. So, I have been encouraging anybody, students, practitioners, anyone who will listen to challenge the status quo, to see oppression. My intention is to provoke students analyze circumstances through a variety of lenses and to encourage them to think about the need for change.

In this book, I am asking people to see what is not enough for other groups in society around them, as well as not enough for themselves. I am asking them to create change through action, through design-based action. Since

I am asking people to design social change, what is the social change? It is the kind of change that led to the abolition of slavery in the Americas, the civil rights movement in the United States, the end of apartheid in South Africa, women's rights around the world. This is the kind of change that I am asking people to consider change that will move people beyond surviving to thriving. To achieve this, people have to think about who they are, what motivates them as change makers.

They need an awareness of the forces that are preventing them and others from thriving. They need to make a conscious effort to design out the forces on an individual and collective level that are keeping us back. Design is a powerful change maker, and part of this power comes from the tools and processes of design, being able to adapt to your contexts.

In thinking about making change, the first thing I ask people to do, and both in my class and in my book, to know themselves, to declare their positionality, to remember that they do not have to hide their identities. Positivist research often encourages you to hide your identity and be objective, while qualitative researchers, researchers who collect data using qualitative methods like interviews and observation, bring their identities to the work that we do. The first part of knowing yourself is about understanding that who we are shows up in the work that we do, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. When we embrace our identities, our work becomes richer as we bring these identities in.

The next point I ask people to consider is to recognize oppression. And that is a huge step that is really needed in making social change. Learning to see oppression humanizes us and liberates us. Since our positionality changes throughout our lives, people need to learn to see oppression so that we do not step into the role of the oppressors ourselves. This builds on the work of Freire, that is why this work is so important to us as designers, to know that we have to see the oppressive forces that are holding back the people around us.

Listening to and seeing others is a skill that some of us have, but some of us do not have. And so, again, it is something that we must work on too. We must learn to connect with people, listen to them, see their concerns, and this will give us a deeper understanding of the issues around them.

I ask the design teams that I coach to focus on equity and justice. Equity is about ensuring that people have equal outcomes even if they need different inputs. When working towards equity, we need to have a critical awareness of the world so that we can see the obstacles of progress for Black people. There are historical, political, economic and cultural obstacles in society,

and we have to focus on working around these obstacles and towards equity and justice and better futures for all.

I also always ask people to think about emotions and bring their emotions into the work that they are doing. I sometimes work in context where people are very cold and we are not expected to be emotional, but anger and joy are both needed to create social change. As we are working towards change, a wide range of emotions will arise and we have to understand that these emotions point out some areas where change is needed. They tell us leaning into both anger and joy lays the foundation for us to understand and explore issues through all these emotions: surprise, fear, excitement, pain, worry. All of these contribute to the work that we do.

One tip about noticing where change is needed that I write about in my book is about being intentionally oppositional. People often want us to just move along and kind of be nice and friendly and sweet, but taking this oppositional stance will help us see the change that is needed, because dominant interpretations of the world favor people from the dominant group. This oppositional stance means that we will intentionally read the world around us through the lens of color, through the lens of gender, through the lens of non-dominant sexuality and all of this will help us to see where change is needed in the future.

Reflection on emancipation, liberation and abolition are significant for creating social change, as these reflections can help us move away from smaller incremental changes. The last tip about designing social change, that I'm drawing from the book is about designing new worlds and futures. I really lean very heavily into Futurism and Afrofuturism in a lot of the projects that I do, because I think that this is a skill or super power that we have as designers. We can envision this future state and not everyone can. Sometimes I use pessimistic futures, generally I use optimistic futures. But these futures, we can build on that to get to social change.

So, what do you want to change? Really think about it! And then organize your life, your agenda, your principles to get you to that. Remember: you and me, we are the change.



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