Accounting for Design Activism: On the Positionality and Politics of Designerly Intervention
Sarah Fox, Catherine Lim, Tad Hirsch, Daniela K. Rosner

An Anecdote
Early during a weekday morning, Felicia and I (Sarah Fox) fixed our attention on a menstrual product dispenser attached to the wall in front of us. We were standing under a set of florescent lights, installing a networked device in a public restroom on the University of Washington’s Seattle campus. I had designed the device to record the number of tampons and pads inside the machine and to project those numbers on a map of the city. With this intervention, I hoped that Felicia, a building supervisor, and her colleagues could more easily track the product levels in the dispenser and thus keep the numerous dispensers across campus more effectively and sufficiently stocked. Stocking menstrual product dispensers had been a perennial problem on the university’s campus since at least the 1970s.¹

Felicia began filling the empty machine and asked how the system worked. Her face relaxed a bit as I walked through the design. She told me that she hoped this platform would help Facilities’ supervisors recognize how difficult it was for the building managers like her to keep machines stocked and operational. The custodians working for her aren’t allowed to fill the dispensers, Felicia explained. Instead, building managers or their superiors have to travel between the areas under their supervision, empty the coins, and fill the machines with more products. This work of checking the machines was onerous: It was outside her regular tasks of managing schedules, and it involved overseeing the facilities of many buildings at once. As a result, she continued, machine maintenance often went undone. Despite being closest to and arguably possessing the greatest knowledge about individual restrooms and their care, custodians were not entrusted with replenishing the machines because of the money handling involved. Felicia laughed at the thought of this and offered to count the money that had accumulated inside the machine. Pulling out a separate and even smaller key from the one she used to open the machine door,

¹ Elsewhere, we chart how the university, its facilities organization, and activist groups have struggled for decades to define local menstrual accessibility. Facilities made the decisive move in the 1980s to remove all menstrual product dispensers, while contemporary student activists recently convinced the institution to offer free products in all restrooms. For more on this history, see Sarah E. Fox, Rafael de Silva, and Daniela K. Rosner, “Beyond the Prototype: Maintenance, Collective Responsibility, and Public IoT,” in Proceedings of the 2018 Conference on Designing Interactive Systems (New York: ACM, 2018).
she released the latch on a small metal box in the interior of the dispenser and counted the coins: “$2.25.” She counted again to be sure, “Yeah, $2.25.”

Introduction
In many ways, the above vignette follows existing projects of design activism. It describes how the Riot project, an intervention into menstrual hygiene resource distribution, was bound up with wider social and political issues. We outfitted restroom menstrual product dispensers with networked sensors to increase access to menstrual products by underrepresented groups. However, in doing so, we also subtly exposed the class hierarchies around routine restroom maintenance. With Felicia’s coin counting during the installation of the Riot device, she revealed an assumption hidden within the conditions in which she worked: that the custodians could not be trusted with the key to the dispensers.

Without understanding the work behind the scenes, we find it difficult to see who benefits from the projects and how. By introducing a consumer Internet of Things (IoT) technology in public sites, such as restrooms, we examine the situated conditions in which it works. How might such a device complicate the jobs of people already on the scene (e.g., by requiring new forms of technical maintenance)? Or how might this installation of networked objects affect the ways that labor relations play out locally? Without considerable post-hoc analysis, design scholars are left with a limited understanding of design activist encounters and their lived (and ongoing) consequences—both for the people typically identified as primary “users” of the design products (in this case, people seeking menstrual pads) and for the private, institutional, state, and activist actors they undoubtedly affect. Through our engagement with Felicia, we gained a deeper understanding of the divisions of labor enacted (and made invisible) in public sites, such as university restrooms.

Given the complexities of design activism, this article unpacks the responsibility of designers in affecting design interventions across two ongoing projects. We first introduce Archivo, a toolkit for collecting paperwork proving undocumented immigrants’ residence in the United States and for applying for federal deferred action programs. We then return to Riot, a series of networked sensors that keep track of hygiene product availability. Comparing these cases allows us to consider positionality in design activism projects that involve different timelines and objectives at different stages of development.2 Drawing on feminist calls for situating action and knowledge, we use these cases to acknowledge and examine designers’ forms of positionality: the relations that enter into the formation of design interventions and the ways that a designer’s situation affects the matter of the designs.3 Recognizing and contending with design positionality

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2 This project resonates with concerns related to adversarial, reflective, critical, and speculative design—modes of investigation that expose the stable and often problematic assumptions, power structures, and ideas that organize design developments.

entails a reflexive analysis of personal history, cultural status (e.g., gender, nationality, and racial identity), and power differentials— aspects of our identities that mark relational positions rather than essential qualities.4

For us, the concept of positionality builds on recent calls for feminist reflexivity that question design’s institutional origins (i.e., where design is enacted and by whom) in ways that sharpen existing understandings of designers’ roles and accountabilities.5 These calls prompt examinations of who funds design activities and for what reasons, as well as how the intervention and its response might play out in relation to activists’ professional affiliations or citizenship status. In what follows, we draw from this work to examine two cases of our own design activism: Archivo and Riot. Each of these projects has been built on close, sustained relationships that we formed with members of marginalized groups. We show how our cases differ crucially according to the designers involved, with aspects of our positions (including institutional and citizenship status and gender identity) shaping our access to funding, publicity, and the interventions themselves.

In discussing these projects, we highlight three dimensions of positionality in design activism that became important across our cases. First, we consider collective responsibility—our work to account for the relationships we have built with not only our collaborators and research community, but also with a broader social movement or constituency. The latter might not be physically present during the project’s development but has much at stake in its outcomes. Second, we explore temporal alignments—the ways our work requires constant coordination to operate across changing time scales. Finally, we investigate flexible positioning, the need for shifting the form and content of a given project in response to changes in public policy and institutional arrangements. Derived from our cases, this three-part framework—collective responsibility, temporal alignments, and flexible positioning—has helped sensitize us to the groups with which we work and take responsibility for our modes of intervention and authorship. We argue that if design activists seek not simply to meet a social need or market pressure, but also to direct campaigns that incite social or political change, they must consider the wider power structures their work builds upon and may further entrench. They must ask, for example, how access to elite networks and funding creates openings that might otherwise remain out of reach. Our inquiry begins this process, exposing how designers’ status has consequences for charting and refiguring the status quo.


Crises of Representation, Reflexivity, and Positionality
Before considering our specific projects of design activism, we turn to the core ideas of positionality that animate our discussion. Our impulse to focus on positionality has a long history rooted in
intellectual traditions both in and beyond the discipline of design. 
For example, the reflexive turn of the 1980s that spread across several fields, including anthropology and sociology, challenged a removed form of study that framed the researcher's own experiences and emotions as invalid forms of knowledge production. Instead, scholars called for recognizing investigators as always shaping the worlds in which they work, the data they produce, and the analyses they develop. This scholarship cast reality as living inside rather than outside the observing subject, continually reproduced through methods of examination and representation. This reflexive perspective rejects a priori distinctions between the analytic tools of researchers and those of their sites of study. Instead, it recognizes their mutual constitution through field engagements.

Within programs of design, scholars have encountered a complementary turn toward reflexivity since at least the 1970s, most visibly through the anti-corporate design activism of Victor Papanek and the rich ethnographic insights of Lucy Suchman and colleagues at the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC). Our work draws particularly from Suchman's studies of expert systems, which expose the range of micro-practices upon which computing interactions depend—what Suchman calls situated actions. Rather than encoding “plans” or “goals” as control structures guiding use, Suchman argues for understanding interactions as ongoing and contingent configurations constituted through active sense-making and partnerships across the social and material world. Moving beyond questions of measurement or support, Suchman—and later, Bowker, Star, and Strauss—draws from feminist perspectives to understand how work becomes visible or invisible in context. Bowker and Star, for example, note the challenges of trying to make nurses’ work visible while retaining important aspects of its ambiguity and the use of discretion.

Since these early calls for situating design activity, several scholars have proposed reflexive tactics for taking up feminist conceptions of reflexivity and positionality in design. In one such example, Randi Markussen encourages a “self-reflective approach” to design that might advance a mutual (and thus equitable) relationship between designer and user. By speaking in their own voices, he claims, designers can move beyond the language of user needs to engage dilemmas across research communities and cooperative design partnerships. Marc Steen similarly argues for reflexivity—or what he describes as an examination of the designer’s role in a human-centered design project—to help navigate the “fragile encounter” between self (designer) and the Other (e.g., collaborators or participants). Expanding from these methodological concerns, Ramia Mazé and Johan Redström put forth the possibility of theoretical development that “happens through, and from

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7 Within anthropology, this recognition marked a reflexive break from traditional modes of “Othering” toward questions of ethnographic positionality. The entanglement of anthropology and colonialism introduced an interrogation of the politics of representation and knowledge production. With this turn came critiques of the self-indulgent ethnographer and the provisional nature of this reporting. Accounts of the ethnographic frame (i.e., what is left inside and outside the analysis) could come with experiments in narrative form (sometimes denounced as creative fiction). Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).
9 See also Suchman’s later call for located accountabilities—the responsibility that arises when one presents a view from somewhere specific. She suggests effective designs get built from the collection of partial and located knowledges. Lucy Suchman, “Located Accountabilities in Technology Production,” *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 14, no. 2 (September 2002): 91–105.
Design Activism: Artifacts, Infrastructures, and Frameworks

Alongside growing concerns for positionality, design scholars have challenged and expanded existing concepts of design activism. Alastair Fuad-Luke describes the practice as “a counternarrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change.”15 Ann Thorpe extends this definition to argue that design activism must “work as activism, and something else, at the same time,” contending with concerns like function, cost, and usability.16 Following on Thorpe’s discussion, Thomas Markussen identifies insufficiencies in efforts to understand design activism through theories borrowed from the social sciences, finding them ill-equipped to describe a “designerly way of intervening.”17 Instead, he argues, design activism must incorporate both political and material practice in the form of a “disruptive aesthetic,” or material expression that evokes revelation, contest, and dissensus among its audience members. These scholars offer careful consideration for how the design community might interpret the merits of design activism, both as political and material objects.

A particular lineage of design activism has emerged over the past decade in support of collective action through design, rather than the development of discrete products.18 This work builds on notions of infrastructuring—a design approach that moves its focus, in the words of Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren, “towards processes and strategies of aligning different contexts and their representatives.”19 According to these scholars, design work may help highlight constructive controversies on matters of concern, such as immigration, belonging, or climate change.20 According to Björgvinsson and his colleagues, designers working in this liberal democratic tradition tend to view “agonist struggle” as both the core of a vibrant democracy and a source for innovation, which could result in a product, a set of services, a social movement, a piece of legislation, or some combination.21

A parallel body of feminist work highlights the challenges that particular forms of positionality in design activism may help address. For example, Irani and Silberman surface the often-hidden processes of micro-work on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (AMT), through the development of the Turkopticon system.22 They later contend with the varied nature of interventionist projects by highlighting how this work provided a means for workers to make do within, design practice”;23 they recognize how the field sits within systems of power and capital that in many ways shape its culture and practices—or, what Dean Nieusma might call “governing mentalities.”24

within the current AMT system (rather than dismantling it) and enabled stories of themselves as “design saviors.” Informing a feminist reflexivity, such accounts offer a means of interrogating design activism in its complexity, rather than painting an exclusively celebratory picture.

Drawing on this feminist reflexivity, we use two case studies to explore aspects of positionality within design activism along three dimensions: collective responsibility, temporal alignments, and flexible positioning. We highlight the formation of coalitions among differently situated actors; we examine the work to align diverse patterns of social and political change; and we document how activist projects must adapt their form and content. These facets of positionality became particularly important to us during our targeted projects of social change, emerging from our analysis of accountabilities in design. In highlighting aspects of our positionality here, we illustrate the multiple influences on the objectives of design activism—influences that often get obscured or go unaccounted for in design (even as they remain integral to the work that results).

**Archivo: A Toolkit for Self-Documentation**

In 2014, then-U.S. President Obama announced a set of executive actions expanding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and establishing Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), granting temporary work authorization and legal protections from deportation and detention to families of mixed immigration status. To qualify for deferred action, applicants were to prove their continued presence in the United States for nine years by providing copies of, for example, education and medical records, pay stubs, receipts, tax returns, and bills—amounting in some cases to hundreds of documents. Responding to this policy development (and its administrative costs to applicants), the second author (Lim) worked with Seattle-based colleagues and organizers of activist and advocacy groups to develop Archivo, a toolkit for collecting and preparing paperwork for undocumented immigrants to access federal deferred action programs. The project was ongoing at the time of writing and comprises four items: a bilingual Spanish/English booklet explaining deferred action and the required documentation; a worksheet to catalog collected items; file folders corresponding to each year of an applicant’s presence in the United States; and a document case (see Figure 1.). Throughout the design process, the Archivo team worked closely with undocumented activist Maru Mora Villalpando on funding proposals and translation of the booklet content, as well as with grassroots groups in 11 states who distributed the Archivo kits.
Over the course the project, the design team responded to constantly changing policies and enforcement practices. After a June 2016 Supreme Court decision blocked the implementation of DAPA, the team redesigned the enclosed booklet to focus on DACA applications. With more visible and frequent detention and deportation efforts since the 2016 presidential election, the team reworked the toolkit again to support families as they prepare for emergency situations, such as encounters with local law enforcement or unexpected Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids. The Trump administration’s termination of DACA in 2017 has been challenged in the courts and—at time of writing—the future of the program is unclear. In response to this uncertainty, the design team supplemented the toolkit with materials useful for the legal and emergency situations undocumented people could face in the immigration enforcement system.

Archivo exposed uneven risks for its users and designers, which manifested differently throughout the intervention. For instance, despite personal connections fueling their interest in working with immigrant communities—two on the team are of foreign-born parents, and the third designer is married to a partner currently applying for naturalization—the design team is comprised of U.S.-born citizens. Team members have the privilege of being secure in their legal status and incur significantly less risk than some of their collaborators (themselves undocumented) and those who use the kits. Although DACA applicants coming forward publicly has helped immigration activists argue for the value of expanded protections for undocumented people, applicants face possible detention or even deportation and separation from their families when they provide ICE with a decade or more of personal information. In providing Archivo as a documentation tool, the design team overlooked the need for express warning about these risks, assuming applicants would eventually seek legal advice.
from attorneys. The team also learned that community members fearful of encounters with ICE agents chose not to attend in-person community gatherings and immigrant rights workshops where kits were distributed (see Figure 2). Those who attended were encouraged to take multiple kits to share with family and friends.

These tensions around status and risk surfaced in other ways. In order to fund the project, for instance, the team entered a design competition, which pushed us toward particular material and aesthetic decisions. The refined visual design details and use of our funder’s brand of high-quality paper added to the project’s timeline and cost. This work led to a product that was more expensive than necessary (which might limit its distribution). We also felt a tension between the polish expected by the design community that the competition served and the practical issues of wide distribution that might benefit undocumented people.

Although our partners expressed appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of Archivo, it became increasingly difficult to justify these material decisions as we confronted concerns on the provisionality of the project. With heightened fears of detention and deportation in the undocumented community, we still question whether the funding we received could have been better spent on other efforts, such as payment for legal counsel to defend individuals wrongfully detained as a result of racial profiling.

These questions of funding and multiple and varied approaches to change continue as we turn to our next case on menstrual access and the Internet of Things (IoT).

Riot: Public IoT for Menstruation
Although millions of people use pads and tampons, few public sites in the United States provide ready or free access to menstrual products, restricting availability for people with limited mobility or socioeconomic resources. To address this concern, the first
author (Fox) and her colleagues conducted interviews and ethnographic observations at parks, community centers, and homeless shelters throughout Seattle, WA, between 2015 and 2018, while building relationships with local activist and advocacy organizations, including the Womxn’s Action Commission. Together with these groups, they developed and installed Riot—a series of modifications to existing public menstrual product dispensers that outfit them with networked sensors so that the product levels might be more easily stocked (see Figure 3). In designing these modifications as IoT technologies, the team explored ways of providing more reliable and distributed access to hygiene products by people with limited resources, while interrogating the implications of the growing number of such devices entering into public sites under corporate-led initiatives (often in the name of efficiency, cleanliness, and managerial control).

The project was ongoing at the time of writing, with installations underway in branches of the Seattle Public Library.

Riot was initiated by two PhD students and an assistant professor within a department of human-centered design and engineering, each of whom identify as women. Although the team experienced consistent housing throughout their lives, one was involved in housing justice activism through a grassroots organization, and another supported an immediate family member who experienced homelessness. This background, along with observational research, inspired them to avoid associating menstruation...
with a narrowly constructed category of “women” and to challenge essentialist views of those who menstruate. One aspect of this position was a shift from unconsciously and uncritically using generic terms, such as “feminine hygiene,” to the use of more descriptive terms, such as “menstrual hygiene.” This change came out of incremental realizations about the gravity of such language during conversations with gynecologists and members of local grassroots organizations supporting transgender youth. These discussions led the team to examine the extent to which menstruation is gendered and obscured by terminology that does little to describe the bodily process, as well as their own positions as cisgender women. Not all people who menstruate are women, and not all women menstruate.

When the design team began collaborating with the Women’s Action Commission (WAC), the organization was in the midst of a campaign within a larger, nationwide movement calling for “menstrual equity” through tax law revisions, collection drives, and education programs in schools and community centers. WAC’s first initiative was the proposal of institutional guidelines mandating the introduction of sanitary napkin dispensers in the gender-neutral restrooms of our home institution. After the passage of this mandate, the group began preparing state legislation that would require all public schools to stock menstrual hygiene products for their students and staff—replicating a program launched by the New York City Council to provide access in public schools, shelters, and correctional facilities. In preparing materials for the proposal, they held discussions with building managers, who voiced concern for funding the proposed shift to free products: How much would it cost? With many comparable programs across the country still in their infancy, the WAC members could not point to an agreed upon average amount. Instead, they had to estimate the cost using current patterns of use; as a result, they viewed the dispenser inserts as a source of data that could be used to gauge the potential cost of the proposed legislation, as well as a means of tracking the program’s uptake if the law were to pass. In doing so, they invited the design team to view Riot as a form of data advocacy, or as a data gathering object to be used in support of their cause.

As researchers working within a college of engineering, the design team’s proximity to technology making also gave access to streams of funding associated with IoT development, enabling the team to financially support the lead student on the project as a research assistant for three years (differing crucially from other student positions, such as an independent study). Proximity to
“innovation” also occupied the imagination of the Facilities organization personnel, who viewed the installation of such devices as a connective link to the student body and as a means of contributing to research on campus. However, the team’s standing as a public institution required visibility of the results, which could come with unwanted attention, including harassment.  

For example, as this project was forming, lead author Fox was subject to a series of brief but targeted social media attacks by members of various men’s rights organizations, who objected to the feminist research featured in her portfolio.

By constructing infrastructure for tracking information about dispenser use and maintenance, Riot also opened up the possibility for members of the menstruating public to be tracked by proxy. Although the design team intended for the information collected to be shared with the users and the maintainers of the dispenser (whether the team or a partner), there remains potential for this data to be distributed through any number of channels. Broadcasting the product levels associated with particular public restrooms on an open online map would present challenges for maintaining a certain level of privacy for those using these facilities. Returning to discussion of the installation of the device, there are varied responsibilities expected of and entrusted to those who maintain the restrooms, and many ways the collected data could be used to further the managerial gaze and monitor custodial work.

To respond to these concerns as the project developed, the team explored other ways to display the information in more protected and situated environments, including community centers, libraries, and homeless shelters. Even with this effort, the team must continually grapple with the reality that, by introducing a means for tracking menstrual hygiene products, we are also making movement through these spaces visible from long-range.

**Attending to Positionality in Design Activism**

The cases detailed above begin to clarify the stakes of recognizing the political conditions that shape design identities within activist encounters—stakes that shift as policy is made or undone and as designers gain access to funding or contribute to the social and political movements they aim to support. With Archivo, our previous experience working with immigrant communities helped us to consider issues of language access, yet the stability of our legal status limited our capacity to see the potential for the major policy turns and court decisions that ultimately unfolded. The project then became reliant on our collaborators’ ability to provide continuity for communities directly affected by these changes through

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32 Corporate-led initiatives fold in gig economy techniques of labor to reform traditionally undervalued work in the restroom. For example, firms use algorithmically assigned on-call scheduling, which reduces the number of hours low-wage workers can depend on each month. For more, see Fox, Sobel, and Rosner, “Managerial Visions.”

33 In some ways, this work might limit the impact and visibility of the project on the broader community, but ensuring the privacy of those who use or care for the restrooms where the dispensers are installed takes precedence.
community meetings, social media, appearances on broadcast television and radio programs, and communication through a network of immigrant rights groups throughout the region and nation. With Riot, conversations with partners led us to recognize aspects of the work we left uninterrogated, such as gender categories around menstruation. But as our language shifted with these insights, so too did our intervention. We moved to install the dispenser inserts in all gender restrooms and advocated for state level policy to be rewritten to foreground the needs of transgender residents. The reflexivity we drew on was ongoing, open, revised, and reinvented over the course of the project.

Examining the nature of positionality in design activism pushes investigators to understand the tradeoffs of anticipated structural shifts and the contexts of political power achieved and maintained. We explore these crucial but underexamined orientations as collective responsibility, temporal alignments, and flexible positioning.

Collective Responsibility: Forming Coalitions Across Difference

Our efforts toward collective responsibility rejected the separation between designer and subject but also embraced the unevenly situated experience of each coalition member. Both Archivo and Riot comprised targeted services, responding to a specific need identified by grassroots collaborators. Attending to positionality in these projects allowed us to form working partnerships while accounting for the differential relations of power that develop alongside them. For instance, both projects exposed how funding can become an important means of making material decisions and organizing labor, but also of forming and maintaining partnerships over time. With Archivo, we began to surface important questions around support for increasingly contentious political issues. In the case of Riot, our design project began to incorporate consumer IoT technologies, the privacy and security implications of which have yet to be fully recognized. We further found that making a project public—and publicity efforts more broadly—may compromise partners’ initial commitments and increase risk to already marginalized populations. Situating our work within collective efforts meant forming coalitions across difference.

Temporal Alignments: Drawing Together Diverse Rhythms of Change

Approaching positionality in design encourages a contemplative sensibility that in our own cases came with slowing down calls to action and social change—a position itself marked by privilege. For Riot, the quick, iterative design process changed pace as we

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considered the surrounding public resource infrastructure and its care. We continually emphasized that the design of the insert must allow for easy repair—shifting to an inexpensive, low-power microcontroller and a long-lasting power bank, for example. While many designers of IoT prototypes claim to develop easily and cheaply deployable devices, we built an IoT project that accommodated existing infrastructure of electricity and maintenance from the start. This adaptive work took significant investment at multiple registers—both technically (through continual battery tests) and socially (by sustaining relationships with municipal and grassroots organizations responsible for hygiene resources and their management).

Flexible Positioning: Responding to Changes in Public Policy and Institutional Arrangements
Archivo had to change its form and content to accommodate funding constraints, as well as policy changes. Due to the priorities of the agency funding the project, we needed to ensure that the project’s material look and feel a certain way: use expensive paper and reflect a cohesive branding and visual style. After an announcement that the DACA program would be dissolved, the team had to radically transform the content of the materials, shifting the nature of the archive. Rather than focusing on government-facing documentation targeted at building a case for legal protections and the right to lawful employment, the folder became a personal archive targeted at equipping undocumented immigrants to face changing government immigration policy and enforcement practices.

Uneven Power Distribution Across Design and Activism
Pulling back from our specific cases, this work highlights the fact that resources, identifications, and status often differ across design collaborators. Recognizing this varied positionality involves accounting for the privilege of the designer to shape the interventions underway. Our professional positions as students and professors, for example, distributed power unevenly across the research team. Many on the Archivo team found themselves on the job market within a year or two of the project’s start, requiring members to balance weekend workshops on immigrant rights with professional pursuits that might call for corporate alignments—two political stances that might ordinarily sit in tension with one another. Collaborating with unknown organizations and examining topics stigmatized in popular accounts proved more imminent for some of us than others.

36 Fox, de Silva, and Rosner, “Beyond the Prototype.”
38 Lucy Suchman has described the role of artificial intelligence researchers. See Lucy Suchman, Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
We also saw how questions of status and stigmatization do not stand on their own but instead entangle with additional hierarchies of difference, such as gender and nationality. It is simply more dangerous for someone who is gender non-binary, for instance, to track down or use tampons or pads in public restrooms due to the threat of harassment or violence (a phenomenon Cass Clemmer calls the “candy bar dilemma”). Likewise, the risks and fears of detention and deportation, seen with the Archivo case, illustrate how questions of nationality can be critical in contexts of design activism.

Beyond pointing out that such power dynamics exist, we encourage those who design to continually grapple with their role in the construction of design outcomes. Through our interventions, we saw how we may unwittingly stage differences that reinforce power differentials or exclusions for those marginalized, invisible, or oppressed. Much is at stake in these interventions and their unintended outcomes. By recognizing their stakes, and by mapping their contingencies, we call into question the promise of their reforms—opening opportunities for responsive revision.

39 Trans activist Cass Clemmer describes the “candy bar dilemma” as the phenomenon of using the restroom of the gender with which one identifies, only to be confronted with shouts from neighboring stalls or urinals on the crinkling sound of a tampon wrapper. To avoid harassment, Clemmer responds “Oh, it’s just a Kit Kat!” See “Talking Periods in Public,” (Washington, DC: National Public Radio, 2018): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6CI4KZIXjQ (Accessed April 30, 2018).