

GLOBAL JUSTICE BUZZ: THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF THE BEEHIVE  
DESIGN COLLECTIVE

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Global Justice Buzz: The Visual Rhetoric of the Beehive Design Collective

Introduction: Political Storytelling and the Road to Cross-Pollination

The landline in our rented coastal cabin rings, and I am a bit nervous. Mandy Bee calls to invite us to dinner at the art-activist Beehive Design Collective's home base, which is twelve miles through the downeast Maine woods and up Highway 1. My spouse and I are on our honeymoon, and have not had a real conversation with anyone else since arriving in New England a couple weeks before. I awkwardly offer to bring some sort of dish to share, which Mandy assures is not necessary. Two days later, we bring organic wine and Fair Trade chocolate to one of the grandest houses in Machias, Maine, a yellow, aging and drafty mansion that once belonged to the town's lumber baron, and is now owned and occupied by members of the Beehive Design Collective. None of the four Bees I had hosted before in Columbia, Missouri are in house; the eight or so Bees there on that cool July evening in 2013 meet us with a mix of warmth and worn-activist weariness. They share with us under-salted and overcooked black

beans, broccoli, conversation about art and Maine. Wedding gift money in our wallets and another secure semester of paid graduate school six weeks away, I feel guilty eating their food and lacking in activist credibility.

Mandy takes us to a community art space just down the street in this small town. We walk over extension cords and up rickety stairs to see the fruit of nine years of dozens of people's labor: the finished, original, ink and paper copy of their *Mesoamerica Resiste* graphics campaign. "We joke that if we were in school, this would be our dissertation," Mandy says. I clumsily mention that I'm writing a visual rhetorical analysis of their art for my Master's thesis. She responds to this positively and with few questions, and I move closer to take in the graphics campaign. Immediately I notice differences between *Mesoamerica Resiste* and previous graphics campaigns; the shades of brown and subtle blue are a departure from the black and white of earlier graphics, but the worker bees and ants in the graphic are familiar. She points to a small hole in the graphics campaign that looks like a cigarette burn, and says that refracted sunlight burnt the hole while artists stepped away from working on it in New Orleans. They chose to not repair the hole, she tells us, to remind themselves of the fragility of art and the work they do. The hole is repaired and unnoticeable in the many poster-sized reproductions of *Mesoamerica Resiste*; Walter Benjamin's observation that "the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility" and that reproducibility allows the function of art to be political rings true for the Bees (1172). Their art and politics are inseparable, and both are designed to be reproduced and shared.

The Beehive Design Collective is based in northern Maine, but have non-residential members in Mexico, Colombia and throughout the United States. On their detailed website, the Bees describe themselves as an all-volunteer, art-activist collective “dedicated to ‘cross-pollinating the grassroots’ by creating images that educate the public and deconstruct complex geopolitical issues” (Beehive). The Bees were co-founded by anti-globalization women activists around the turn of the millennium; its members now are of mixed genders. Comprised of feminists with a variety of political identifications, the collective works “to create holistic, accessible, and educational images that inspire critical reflection and strategic action” (Narrative 20). To create these images, the Bees



Figure 1, A Bee presents *The True Cost of Coal*

employ methods of storylistening and storytelling by doing field research, then transpose these stories and research into intricate graphics campaigns. Their medium is black and brown ink on white paper: the mural-like graphics campaigns are

around 15 feet long and six feet tall (fig. 1 and 2). Utilizing mostly black and white adds an element of intense contrast to their work; it is also less expensive to reproduce. Many anonymous volunteers work together to research, draw and explain the graphics campaigns, smaller versions of which are available for free on their website, and larger poster versions which people can purchase on a donation-based sliding scale at presentations or online. The Bees say that they have distributed over 100,000 such posters, which are not copy-written, but part of the Creative Commons (Narrative 20).

The Bees are rhetorically attuned to their audiences, and present in a way that reaches somewhat across the spectrum of agreement, in which “ones” strongly agree with the speaker’s message, “twos” mostly agree, “threes” are neutral, uninformed or apathetic, “fours” mostly disagree and “fives” strongly disagree. As I will delve into more deeply in chapter one, the Bees are mostly



Figure 2, *The True Cost of Coal*

successful at reaching ones and twos, and utilize word choices that keep threes and possibly fours from dismissing their ideas. Like most people who make arguments, they do not attempt to reach out to or change those who strongly disagree. Their audiences range from elementary, high school and university students, religious organizations, public audiences at libraries, environmental organizations, indigenous peoples' groups in Colombia and social justice organizations (15). Many audience members come because they are specifically interested in their art and politics, but some come because they are simply drawn to the art, or come because of a class they are enrolled in. In presentations, a few Bees display a graphics campaign reprinted on fabric as big as 12 by 20 feet and explain the complex scenes, stories and metaphors within it; the stories they tell have a fable-like quality to them, although the stories speak of actual events. They tailor presentations to their audiences, and, given the size and complexity of their campaigns, do not try to discuss every graphic detail in their 30 to 90 minute presentations.

The Bees' earliest graphics campaigns, *Free Trade Area of the Americas*, has for a decade hung just above the dish rack in the back room of a local peace organization I have been a part of since 2004. As a teenager hungry to plug into activist work who sought to understand global politics, I stared at that intricate, black-and-white poster many times. I was fascinated by the complex and overtly political art, and able to grasp that the people who made the art thought that free trade was a bad idea, though I did not have a deeper understanding of trade agreements at the time. Eventually I noticed that the poster had no trademark

symbol, and instead was part of the Creative Commons, which resonated with my growing interest in socialist, Marxist and anarchist ideas. When the collective came to Columbia, Missouri for an on-campus presentation in 2010, I jumped at the chance to see them and their art in person. The Bees impressed me with their passionate, clear presentation of the *Plan Colombia* graphics campaign; most of the crowd, myself included, were not familiar with the devastating and expensive role of the United States in Colombia's drug war, and appeared engaged and willing to learn from the Bees' presentation. I saw how the Bees found and explained a kairotic moment that many in the Global North had missed, and wondered what I could learn from their tactics. Many attendees



stuck around after the presentation to talk with each other and the Bees, to network with other activists, or to simply enjoy an environment that challenged political apathy. I have since seen the Bees at the 2010 U.S. Social

Figure 3, *Mesoamerica Resiste* outside

Forum in Detroit, and have hosted the Bees at events I co-organize, including Columbia Food Not Bombs. (Food Not Bombs is a loosely organized, global organization that serves free meals as protests against violence and poverty-inducing policies.) Since 2010, the Bees have presented *The True Cost of Coal* and *Plan Colombia* at Columbia Food Not Bombs, and have presented these and *Mesoamerica Resiste* on the campus of the University of Missouri-Columbia (fig. 3 and 4).



Figure 4, *Mesoamerica Resiste* outside

The life of a Bee is often semi-nomadic. Part-time Bees live throughout the Americas, and contribute by helping

with research and drawing. Full-time Bee work is unpaid and with no health insurance benefits, though Bees do get to live in a regal, drafty old mansion and have some meals paid for. Most full-time Bees have other part-time or seasonal employment. Presenter Bees often drive for many miles across the country, and have presentations on most days they are touring. On tour, Bees sleep on the

couches and floors of strangers, fellow activists, and old friends. They answer countless questions about their art and politics from audience members, most of whom I have seen appear to be open to or in agreement with the Bees' ideas. The benefits of Bee work are mostly intangible: the opportunity to create or speak about art and politics to many people; the privilege of sharing the stories of other activists they admire; the adventure of seeing new places. Their funding comes through donations, from selling posters and other art on a sliding scale, and from university honorariums.

In “Economic geographies as situated knowledges,” postcolonial sociologist Wendy Larner challenges activists and academics to begin approaches to theorizing economies from the perspective that “economic knowledges are always situated, multiple and hybrid wherever they are found” (91). Seeing the work of activists as sites ripe for inspection, Larner asks academics to consider “what role has the global justice movement played in proliferating analyses of neoliberalism?” (96). I agree that this is a question that politically minded academics and activists should consider, and see the Beehive Design Collective's graphics campaigns as primary activists' sources worthy of close examinations. In this thesis, I examine how the Beehive Design Collective's artistic methods and politics function within the context of the global justice movement, postcolonial critiques and transnational feminist theory. I examine briefly the mission, history and methods of the Beehive Collective. I argue that the Bees' creative use of material rhetorics that combine art with political storytelling should be valued as an effective form of visual rhetoric, and that

learning from their methods could help other activists and academics better articulate their critiques of globalization and neoliberalism. Their use of words, images and affectively resonant in-person presentations increase people's understandings of both systemic inequalities and of globalized resistance. I then offer detailed visual rhetorical analyses of their two latest graphics campaigns, *Mesoamerica Resiste* and *The True Cost of Coal*. I argue that in *Mesoamerica Resiste* and *The True Cost of Coal*, the global justice movement-aligned Beehive Design Collective works to reveal hidden transcripts of resistance and domination by illustrating the historical and contemporary effects of colonialism, neocolonialism and neoliberalism. The Bees find and create kairotic moments to effectively interrupt teleological narratives of homogenized globalization and "progress" on Western terms; further, they show these interruptions as real sites of community resistance, celebration and possibility. I conclude that their in-person presentations are especially effective ways to critically explain complex transnational economic and social issues, and that their presentations and art can cultivate critically important community discussions.

## Chapter One: Explaining the Gaps

### **Contesting Neoliberal Globalization**

Organizations and movements on the radical Left are often criticized by mainstream (and sometimes progressive) media for lack of clarity and failure to communicate their ideas and proposed solutions in a cohesive manner. This is not always a fair critique; Occupy Wall Street, for example, explained its positions on its website for anyone who cared to look and consider a complex critique of neoliberalism and corporate culture (Madrick 9). Neoliberalism can be broadly defined as a hegemonic capitalist order that measures all policies and actions primarily by their short-term economic benefits, with disregard for social inequality and environmental destruction. As the impacts of globalized neoliberal policies affect so many systems – economic, social, environmental, political – in-depth critiques of corporate globalization are inherently complex and can be difficult to communicate effectively, especially in length of a television news byte or newspaper article. In 2003, global justice activist and anthropology professor David Graeber opined that

It's hard to think of another time when there has been such a gulf between intellectuals and activists, between theorists of revolution and its practitioners. Academics who for years have been in the habit of publishing essays that sound like position papers for vast social movements that do not in fact exist seem seized with confusion or, worse, dismissive contempt, now that real ones are everywhere emerging (325).

Although the work of transnational, globalization and/or feminist scholars like Valentine Moghadam, Michael Hardt, and J.K. Gibson-Graham is welcome evidence that this gulf is narrowing, I suggest that a larger gap concurrently exists between academics and activists who *can* map and critique the complex linkages of neoliberalism and transnational capitalist systems, and everyday people whose material conditions are shaped by neoliberalism and globalization, but have limited exposure to its critiques, or even its lexicon. I argue that the erudite activists of The Beehive Design Collective seek to change this. Utilizing a transnational and feminist lens to illustrate the complexities of globalization and resource extraction, The Beehive Design Collective takes a positive step toward narrowing that gap by extending explanations and critiques of globalization and neoliberalism to wider audiences within and beyond academic and activist circles.

Neoliberal globalization, which is in many ways the Twenty-first century's descendant of previous centuries' colonialism, has been contested and challenged by the anti-globalization/ global justice movement since the 1990s. In the words of globalization scholar Valentine Moghadam, "(t)he global justice movement... has emerged precisely to challenge the dominance of a neoliberal world order, to call for 'another world,' and to protest the excesses of corporate capitalism and its political allies" (20). Challenging neoliberal global dominance and naming the legacies of colonialism is a noble and massive task, but in order for that task to be taken up, activists and academics must explain to a wider audience what the hard-to-see implications of globalization are and how

situations got to be that way.

Transnational critiques of economic and social structures acknowledge that globalization has unfolded unevenly, and that the effects of neoliberalism are felt differently in different places. Teo Ballve notes that since the U.S. anti-Leftist intervention in the Dominican Republic in the late 1960s, and especially since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, Latin America “quickly became the premier economic and social laboratory for neoliberalism. Arguably, nowhere in the world has this model been so expansively and rigidly implemented, and in no other region has the rejection of the model been so clear and so loud” (Prashad 27). Given the dynamic social and political climate in Latin America, choosing Central America as a focal point to discuss globalization and resistance in *Mesoamerica Resiste* is a kairotically astute choice for the Bees. They display a similar kairotic awareness with their focus on Appalachia in *The True Cost of Coal*, as the United States and other countries continue to rely on coal energy at the expense of land, drinking water and public health in the region.

The Beehive graphics campaigns are works of visual argument, which J. Anthony Blair defines as “the species of visual persuasion in which the visual elements overlie, accentuate, render vivid or immediate, and otherwise elevate in forcefulness a reason or set of reasons offered for modifying a belief, an attitude or one’s conduct” (50). He notes that many visual arguments, like the Bees’ graphics campaigns and storytelling, are actually mixtures of visual and verbal communication, and further sees visual arguments as having the potential for

greater rhetorical power than strictly verbal arguments (52). What makes the Bees' work relevant for rhetorical scholars is how the Bees' technique of combining storylistening, creating art and political storytelling creatively employs the use of material rhetorics, which Kristie Fleckenstein defines as “those discourses specifically designed to shape, identify, analyze, and validate aspects of our lived reality” (Fleckenstein 11). Like many activists and academics, the Bees have a critical and wide understanding of economic inequalities and environmental destruction, and seek to share with people their understanding while creating a better world. Admittedly, systemic critiques of globalization can be dense, dull, depressing and otherwise difficult to articulate. Including visual representation with spoken word can help overcome those barriers to communication and social change. Fleckenstein explains that

how we articulate our realities and identities is inseparable from how we see and what we see. That is, the rhetoric by which we invent, validate, and disseminate our understanding of our multifaceted realities and identities is inextricably interwoven with images and shared ways of seeing. Understanding any aspect of our existence – from our beliefs about the universe, to our understanding of gender and ethnic identity, to our interfacing with technology – requires attention to the dynamic of word, image and shared ways of seeing that constitute our experiences.  
(Fleckenstein 6)

I argue that the Bees' nuanced and ultimately optimistic use of words and images increases people's understandings of globalization and resistance; the art-activists reflect, validate and create the type of world they want to see.

The Beehive Collective engages in what Fleckenstein calls world making and constructing the real: “the complex processes of perception and articulation

that persuade a community that a certain material reality ... exists" (7). Within their process of constructing the real, the Bees have to persuade their audiences that both the global problems *and* local/ global resistance exist. Fleckenstein describes the three interlocking stages of the "dynamic social construction of the real [as] emergence, appropriation, and resistance" (8). Emergence is a process by which "a perception, articulation, or shared vision evolves" (8). Appropriation is a process "by which a community takes as its own a perception, articulation, or shared vision, making it a part of its taken-for-granted reality, its construction of the real (8)." In appropriation, perceptions can become so ingrained that the social constructedness of those perceptions can become obscured. In the context of North Americans appropriating images from Latin America, the proliferation of images of communist militant Che Guevara reproduced on t-shirts and posters made in sweatshops and sold on the free market is an ironic example of "resistance" co-opted into appropriation. Avoiding the Che cliché, *Mesoamerica Resiste* contains no Che images. The Beehive Collective's graphics campaigns are genuinely involved in the resistance stage: "the process by which a segment of the community posits alternative perceptions, articulations, and shared visions, calling into questions previous constrictions of the real" (8). Part of the process of influencing social change is giving evidence that changes have already and continue to happen all over the world; alternative interpretations of the status quo and shared visions of alternatives are what the Beehive Collective vivify so effectively in their art.

As works of visual argument actively engaged in resistance, previous

Beehive graphics campaigns examine the local and transnational effects of colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization, with NAFTA, the US drug war in Colombia, the G8 and genetically modified crops as primary sites of critique. In 2010, the Bees released and toured with *The True Cost of Coal* (fig.3), which looks at mountaintop removal and coal-mining in Appalachia, which they refer to as a “resource-extraction colony within the United States” (Coal Narrative 3). The Bees latest graphics campaign, *Mesoamerica Resiste*(fig. 2), is the third and final in a series that looks at globalization in the Americas: *Plan Colombia* and *Free Trade Area of the Americas* came out in the early Aughts.

### **Very Large Conversation Starters**

In a culture where much political organizing is online, the Bees offer a tangible, in-person, and more affective alternative. Although online organizing has its place and benefits, especially its ability to send information far quickly, it lacks a richness and emotional resonance that can be found through interacting with other people in person. Perhaps politically conscious people are hungry for those in-person interactions, as it can be easy for political minorities to feel isolated, overwhelmed or defeated by the status quo. My sense is that people are more focused during and remember more from in-person interactions than digital ones. The Bees offer a place, event, people, art and stories to remember, not just screen shots and statistics. Further, as activists and educators, they offer the somewhat unique opportunity for those they try to inform and persuade to ask them questions in person. One of the first questions a white audience member asked the white presenter Bees at their March 2014 presentation at the

University of Missouri-Columbia was how they avoid cultural appropriation in their art. Tyler answered that the researcher Bees had a rule to not take anything not freely given, including stories, but that it was still difficult. About ten Bees began research in 2003 by telling Central Americans they met that they wanted to share their stories, and asking what they wanted them to tell, which the Bees attempt to convey in the graphics campaign. Their goals were to put in everything, and to be a conversation starter for people living in affected communities. The posters open up a kairotic moment of sorts – they make it possible for other people who see these graphics to feel more comfortable telling their own stories. Those conversations can be fertile ground for deeper political engagement and community building; this tactic has a decidedly feminist bent to it.

To call the graphics campaigns detailed and intense risks an understatement; the hyper-intricacies and scale of the graphics campaigns can be overwhelming and do not invite a quick understanding. This is intentional; the issues the Bees illustrate match the level of complexity and sheer size of the systems. While global systems impose and have a large effect on billions of people's lives, the 15 by six feet or larger graphics campaigns the Bees tour with are imposing in the spaces they take up; in the often sterile classrooms and bland spaces they present, their art is difficult to ignore or look away from. At the US Social Forum in Detroit, their *True Cost of Coal* was one of the largest visual displays in the expansive warehouse-like room where dozens of activists' groups had informational booths. Where the eye was drawn was where people were often drawn: the graphics campaign was like the biggest painting in a wing of a

museum; if one was in the vicinity, they at least had to look. Simply being grandiose is visual rhetorical choice that effectively works against mainstream society's tendency to look away from difficult and complex issues. Once people look at their art, the possibility of increasing understanding and/or creating a space for conversations is possible.

The Bees' art process is also complex; more than 20 people worked on illustrating *Mesoamerica Resiste*, and more worked on research. Tyler compared their process to that of making a comic book, with writers, pencil artists, inkers and artists who worked on lines and shades. For being such a collaborative process, the graphics campaigns are remarkably cohesive; he explained that the groups mapped out and layered scenes beforehand, and that different teams of artists focused on different groups of illustrations: mammals, insects, robots, etc. The Bees took drafts of *True Cost* to the Appalachians they were trying to portray, and made revisions. This is another way the Bees ensure the art is collectively made; that is, the art-makers aren't even just Bees, but the subjects of the graphics campaign. The act of making art is not just who outlines, draws and shade, but those who research, tell and listen to stories and evaluate the graphics campaign for accuracy. Tyler discussed how others utilize their posters as teaching tools, and showed a picture of a wall mural that other anonymous artists had recreated from a scene from *Mesoamerica Resiste* of folks resisting an airport being built in Otenko, Mexico.

Navigating the politics of naming oppressive systems and the theories that critique them can be difficult for Bees, educators, activists and scholars of

rhetoric. Tyler Bee explained that he deliberately avoids naming and using terms that people will not understand, or might react strongly against. He states that although many people (correctly) think of *Mesoamerica Resiste* and its presentation as an Anti-capitalism 101 class, he never uses the word “capitalism” in presentations. (*Mesoamerica Resiste* does include a soda can with the word “Capitalismo” written in a Coca-Cola-like font, and a small flag on the outside that reads “Capitalism” in overly flourished script.) In his view, some audience members would stop listening if the Bees were to name and critically engage with possibly divisive and misunderstood terms like capitalism, anarchism and/or socialism. Those already critical of capitalism might not even notice that Bees don't use the terms (as I did not the first two times I saw Bee presentations), while audience members who haven't questioned capitalism but do have concerns about human rights and the environment are less likely to react negatively. One of the Bees' intentions is to make their graphics campaigns accessible not only to the Left “choir” – that is, the ones and twos on the spectrum of agreement – but to any person curious about art who happens to see their work, regardless of their political leaning or awareness. This is also why they eschew lecturing for a storytelling format with opportunities for audience participation. Although they do not try to reach those who strongly disagree with their politics, the Bees do not assume that their audience members have most of the same values and critiques as they, which broadens their appeal. This approach allows them to plant more metaphorical seeds; if an audience member takes away nothing about economic inequality, but learns about and develops a

concern about, say, mountaintop removal and clean water, the Bees have at least succeeded in getting them to question the status quo.

Although this makes their work accessible to a wider crowd, not naming is also a form of political compromise. Perhaps capitalism retains some of its influence because people are reluctant to explicitly critique it; perhaps feminism is a term too quickly shushed by those who fear being dismissed or called crazy, even as they utilize its lenses and have benefited from its influence. As an educator who has taught college freshmen composition at a fairly conservative Midwestern mega-university, I can see the usefulness of selectively leaving a few words unspoken in an attempt to keep the channels of communication open. No doubt, some of the Bees' audience members are students who attend solely because their politically minded instructors have offered them extra credit to go and write about it (as I did for my students); the Bees know how to utilize rhetoric that appeals to, or at least does not off-put them. Then again, perhaps this group of people – the neutral, undecided or apathetic, and the somewhat disagree on the spectrum of agreement – need to hear the viewpoint that capitalism itself is inherently oppressive and deserving of critique. The unintended consequence of the Bees' rhetorical choice is the risk of isolating those who strongly agree with their politics, but see capitalism and feminism as terms that must be employed for an accurate understanding of what the Bees depict and discuss. Ultimately, though I do feel a tinge of disappointment at the Bees' only implicit use of feminism and critiques of capitalism in presentations, I understand the broader political utility of this selective and pragmatic approach to presenting and

performing.

Still, the Bees constantly, if less than explicitly, critique capitalism and neoliberalism within their graphics campaigns and presentations; their website explicitly challenges neoliberal ideology and identifies the group as part of the Global Justice Movement. Outside of identifying as feminist, which the group does not highlight in presentations, individual Bees have a range of Left political identifications, and do not ultimately weight in on any anarchism versus socialism debate. That said, references to a “Black Bloc” and the “anti-globalization movement” in earlier graphics campaign narrative booklets could lead viewers to associate the Bees' political views with anarchism; notably absent from their latest campaigns are any depictions of elected leaders.

As the Bees consider cultural appropriation and power dynamics in their work, I also consider how my background as a formally educated white Midwestern activist and academic shapes my outlook and writing. In her rhetorical history of national identity formations in Ecuador, Christa J. Olson asks Global North scholars to remember the historical legacy of “political colonialism, economic globalization and cultural imperialism,” and how those influences

color not only our analyses but also the scenes we encounter. We would be foolish to deny how thoroughly they infuse our analytical means as we would be to simply accept them as given. ... Power relations always infuse our historiography; our analytical lenses always skew as much as they reveal. Any rhetorical history, then, must incorporate tactics that trouble the scope and certainty of its own claims. ... We must also call attention to how those power dynamics inevitably work within our own representations of rhetorical practice. (Olson xiv)

Although this thesis is a visual rhetorical analysis of an art-activist collective's

work, and not a rhetorical history of the events the Beehive Design Collective include in their graphics campaigns, Olson's advice shapes how I see my role as a Global North academic and activist, and how I analyze the Bees' work. I attempt to take into account both my Western, biased analytical lens, and to consider the methods in which the Bees navigate their perspectives as sometimes outsiders writing about people from Central America and Appalachia.

## Chapter Two: Hidden Transcripts Revealed in *Mesoamerica Resiste*

### **Incubating Sites for Resistance**

In her examination of competing models of empowerment within the context of global neoliberalism, Rebecca Dingo finds that models that “push audiences to act not as neoliberal subjects who wish to be saviors of disenfranchised women in the Global South, but that instead offer audiences a better understanding of the global politics of gender equality” are more empowering for audiences (Dingo 177). I argue that the Beehive Design Collective utilizes a similar model of empowerment through teaching a better understanding of the global and local politics of resource control and extraction in Mesoamerica, lessons which activists and academics alike can garner inspiration and ideas for their own struggles. In this section, I will analyze *Mesoamerica Resiste* for its contribution to postcolonial and transnational critiques and

analyses of neoliberalism. I will argue that in *Mesoamerica Resiste*, the global justice movement-aligned Beehive Design Collective works to reveal hidden transcripts of resistance and domination by illustrating the historical and contemporary effects of colonialism, neocolonialism and neoliberalism.

*Mesoamerica Resiste* began with a small group of researcher Bees from the Americas going to Mexico and Central American in 2004, where they interviewed “communities directly impacted by the infrastructure projects of Plan Puebla Panama” (Narrative 1). Nine years of research and drawing later, *Mesoamerica Resiste* came out in the fall of 2013; the Bees first *Mesoamerica* tour began in the early 2014, with tours in Colombia, Mexico, the United States and Canada.

Utilizing a postcolonial lens to look at the uneven effects of “development” allows a drastically more complex understanding of people's lived daily experiences in the Global South. For this thesis, I will define a postcolonial lens broadly as a critical take on the lasting negative effects of colonialism. The Beehive Collective adds to this perspective a refusal to separate (at least in regards to Central America) the impacts of colonialism, postcolonialism, and neocolonialism. Unlike top-down analyses that focus on large-scale economic trends and policies, utilizing a postcolonial lens shows what development looks like “through the eyes of the local people making daily livelihood decisions in situations of conflict, hope, resistance, ambivalence, despair and uncertainty” (Sylvester 187-188). Sylvester further adds that the “strength of the postcolonial refocus on people rather than grand trends comes out in 'data sources' that development analysts would never use – novels, testimonials, drama and poetry”

(188). In their narrative booklet, available in English and Spanish, and in presentations to various communities, the Bees explain *Mesoamerica Resiste* by relaying the testimonials of Central Americans who have, for 500 years, experienced violence and resource control from outsiders – first from the Spanish and British colonizers, and then from multinational corporations who continue to control water supplies and land rights, along with transnational financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization.

In front of a crowd of about 30 people, Tyler Bee begins the *Mesoamerica Resiste* presentation by connecting colonization to today. He explains that many people's stories are embedded in the pictures, and compares the specific and composite stories to allegorical fables. He gives a bit of background on the graphics campaign trilogy, and states that there is good and bad news to share. The Bees seem to assume that their audiences have some basic understandings of climate change and of the exploitative nature of capitalism; they do not attempt to reach climate change-deniers or those who only see positives in transnational capitalism and resource extraction. J. Anthony Blair writes that this is a common tactic of visual arguments, in which presenters typically rely on the audience holding onto enthymemes – a set of unstated assumptions and agreements, such as that the exploitation of people and the Earth is wrong and a practice worth challenging (52). As activists for the global justice movement, the Bees have a capitalism-critiquing political agenda that they seek to spread through their educational and persuasive graphics campaigns. As Carolyn Erler notes,

“(w)orks of visual narrative seek to create and recruit true believers to a particular ideological position or activist cause” (90).

The outside of *Mesoamerica* is drawn from an outsiders' perspective, and is meant to resemble a colonial cartographer's view of the region – a lens the Bees present as focused on resource extraction and plunder (fig. 4). Tyler orients the audience by drawing attention to the compass rose, which resembles a roulette table and is flanked by Starbucks and Chiquita (United Fruit) logos. He states that Chiquita/ United Fruit were behind a coup and military dictatorship in Guatemala. As coffee and bananas are common breakfast items in the Global

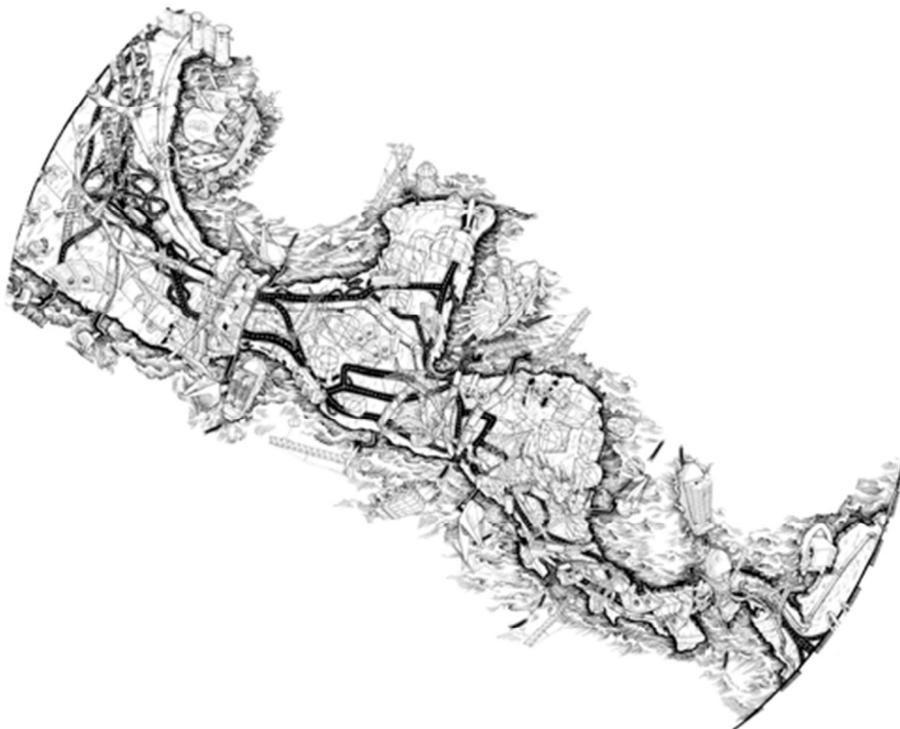


Figure 5, *Mesoamerica* detail

are essentially “stealing the topsoil so we can have a luxury breakfast.” Without using the word “capitalism,” he talks critically about the term “barriers to trade,”

North, he uses this scene to implicate the audience and himself in the troubled realm of transnational capitalism that relies on exploitative labor. He states that “we”

and explains that those “barriers” are worker protections, labor laws and environmental regulations.

In the center of the graphic is southern Mexico and the Central American countries of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. Above is the United States and Gulf of Mexico; below is Colombia at the top of South America (fig. 5).

The Bees decided to focus on this region to bring light to a proposed “development plan” introduced in 2001 by then-Mexican president Vicente Fox and the Interamerican Development Bank, called Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). Journalist Wendy Call writes that the plan proposes building new superhighways along the Pacific and Gulf coasts of Mexico to connect southern Mexico to the north and to Central America, which would be linked to an expanded highway across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The three stated goals of PPP are to:

( 1) increase the transit and industrial infrastructure of the region, improving the capacity for export industries, ( 2) catalyze a shift of the region's economy from agriculture to assembly plant *maquiladoras* [sweatshops] and manufacturing, and ( 3) expand private control over the vast natural resources in the region. (Call 24)

In *Mesoamerica*, the Bees draw map-like lines throughout Central America that are not nation-state borders, but the mega-interstates of PPP. Depicting roads instead of national borders highlights one of the hallmarks of globalized neoliberalism: the role and importance of corporations and the transnational flow of goods and capital have superseded the role of nation-states. Fox's \$4 billion plan also proposes to invest funds into oil and methane gas pipelines and private

mass transit projects to work closely with the Free Trade Area of the Americas plan by “providing the physical infrastructure and cheap labor force needed for the post-FTAA pried-open markets of the Americas” (24).

Although multinational corporations still have major influence on the everyday lives of Central Americans, widespread resistance to the FTAA and PPP stopped both from being fully implemented; the failure of a trade agreement and a development plan to come to fruition represents huge, if incomplete successes for those opposed to neoliberal policies. What makes the Bees depictions of the FTAA and PPP relevant for scholars of rhetoric is how effectively they frame attempts at domination as incubating sites for organized resistance. Vijay Prashad notes that the collapse of social indicators in Latin America and creation of new economic spaces, “as well as a renewed assault on the raw material resources of the area, produced re-engaged social movements”, including indigenous, workers', socialist and women's movements (Prashad 17-18). As the Bees show and explain, Plan Project Panama was met with significant opposition throughout the region, and in 2008, the project was renamed the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project, or Project Mesoamerica. The Bees label this section of the graphics campaign “Paving the Way for Free Trade” (Resiste Narrative 3). Still, they are not propagandists; in presentations, the Bees explain that renaming the project also made it harder to organize against, and that it is unclear which of the proposed infrastructure plans will be built. They also discuss Zapatista resistance in southern Mexico, as the Zapitista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) formed in 1994 to coincide with and

resist NAFTA (Prashad 28). Gerardo Renique writes that ELZN is driven by “principles of solidarity, self-respect, collective participation and communal interest; these popular institutions constitute a powerful challenge to the individualism, self-interest and exclusion at the heart of neoliberalism,” and further constitute “a frontal assault” on “the neoliberal celebration of unrestricted markets, free trade and electoral regimes as the only possible path to a modern, democratic and civilized existence” (Prashad 36).

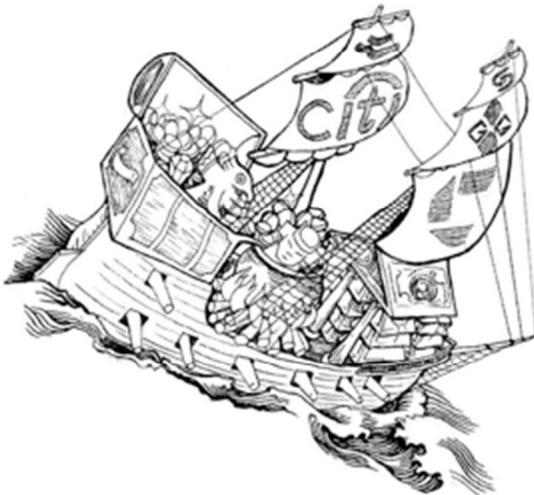
### **The Legacy of the Conquistadores in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The two panels of the outside of the graphic are mostly in black and white, with some bronze tones (fig. 4). Unlike the ground-up view on the inside, the perspective on the outside focuses primarily on the large-scale economic trends, as outsiders in favor of an extractive economy and neocolonial policies might also. But the Bees dramatically render the horrors and sinister elements of these large-scale policies in a way that seems to expose the hidden transcript of dominant groups. James C. Scott explains that hidden transcripts are the actions, thoughts and opinions that subordinate groups act out among themselves, but, for concern for their safety, do not act out in front of those who seek to dominate them. Dominant groups also conceal their vulnerabilities and lack of cohesion in front of subordinate groups, which makes up their hidden transcripts. According to Scott, “the hidden transcript is a social product and hence a result of power relations among subordinates... (L)ike folk culture, the hidden transcript has no reality as pure thought; it exists only to the extent it is practiced, articulated, enacted, and disseminated within the offstage social sites” (119).

Above Central America is the United States, depicted as heavily armed,



Figure 6a, 6b and 6c, *Mesoamerica* detail



with a walled border. The U.S. is drawn as saturated with the towers of consumerism – McDonald's, coal and nuclear plants, petroleum pipelines, methane gas, mega crosses, a maze of highways and

surveillance cameras overflow the country with materialism – the waste products of which spill into the Gulf waters. In this scene the Bees illustrate the connections between colonialism and neocolonialism most clearly. From the shores of the US sail three different ships that look like Spanish colonial ships, updated, still functional and sailing after 500 years. One ship has a sail with a Citibank logo

and trunks full of stolen gold from the Americas, which draws connections between historical and contemporary financial and resource control (fig. 6a). A second ship sends down sugar and corn-syrup-filled junk food, depicted with oars of sugar spoons, a Kool-Aid hull and cupcake masts (fig. 6b). Here, as in many of their images that harken brands recognizable to Global Northerners, the Bees utilize absurdity and humor to point out the insidious nature of American consumer culture. In addition to being a critique of unhealthy North American food, this ship also draws connections between the trans-Atlantic triangle slave trade and the production of sugar and rum. Enslaved Africans in the Caribbean were forced to harvest sugar cane, which the affluent in Europe and North America consumed. Relating to that ship is a third ship, a ship of enslaved people, some of whom are executed and hanging from the ship (fig. 6c). The sails of this ship are watchtowers, flanked by large surveillance cameras, which are recurrent throughout the graphics campaign. Here the Bees connect slavery with the contemporary police state, prison industrial complex and high imprisonment rates of North American people of color.

Ships also sail north from Central America, exporting natural resources. Three of these four boats show the environmental and the economic impacts of resource extraction, and that environmental destruction makes its impact on more than just humans. As there are no humans represented in the graphics campaigns, Tyler Bee explains why they use animal characters: to remind audiences and themselves “that we all have nonhuman neighbors and our actions affect them too.” In the graphics campaign, they utilize extinct animals,

including an ice age armadillo-like mammal, to show the presence of ancestors. All of the animals in the “spirit stream” on the inside of *Mesoamerica* are extinct, endangered or threatened; some species that were around when they started making the graphic are now extinct. Gibson-Graham (two scholars who write under one name) suggest that adding typically unaccounted for animals, plants and the landscape “to our concern about the exploitative interdependence between producers and non-producers” should coincide with activists' critiques of human exploitation (334). The Bees show such a consideration with their depiction of a burger boat with slaughtered cattle heads, which is guided by trademarked fast-food sails. This ship pulls logs from a clear-cut, a reminder that forests, cattle and human health all suffer in the name of cheap meat for the North.

A mining ship that resembles a dump truck carries what appears to be a load of coal, and another ship carries barrels of oil and of fresh water, surrounded by cannons. Including oil and water together opens the space for a critical dialog on current and future struggles over control of natural resources. Tyler states that the world's largest coal mine is in Colombia, but that the locals there don't have electricity – the power is instead inefficiently shipped north. The indigenous folks who live by the mine do have to deal with the downsides of coal extraction; stolen land that has been poisoned by the extraction process. Not just critical of official corporations and governments, the Bees also include a drug trafficking boat leaving the coast of Colombia, armed with hypodermic needles. Right behind the drug trafficking boat is a smaller boat carrying what the narrative

booklet calls “the CIA's money laundering machine,” which is a reference to “the CIA's direct involvement in profiting off the drug trade” (Resiste Narrative 5).

Harkening their previous graphics campaign, *Plan Colombia*, Tyler states that the

United States “sent \$10 billion for drug war in Colombia.”

Coming off of the Florida coast is a trash vortex of American consumerism and waste, in which a flip phone, polystyrene cup, electronics chargers, an aerosol can and other everyday middle-class consumer items designed for the dump are shown as what they can become post-consumer: ocean trash (fig. 7). The objects depicted are just dated enough – the box television with rabbit ear

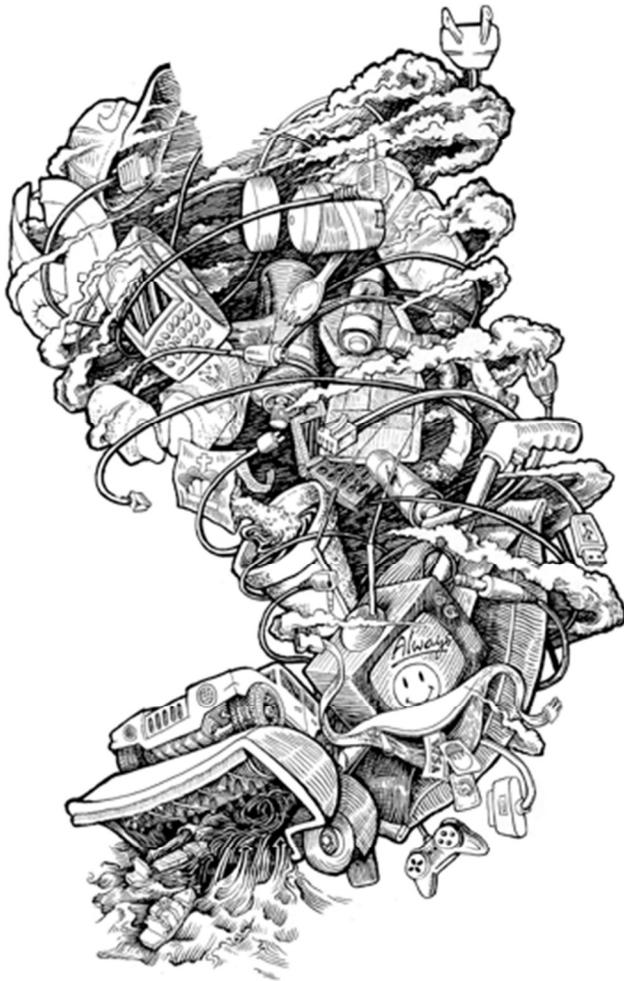


Figure 7, *Mesoamerica* detail

antennas, the video game controller that looks like it is from the late 1990s – to remind the audience that their trash, which they may not have seen for years, still has a presence somewhere – possibly leaking into the ocean or washing onto the coasts of Central America. The scene makes clear that there is no *away* in throw away. In presentations, the Bees implicate both themselves and Western

consumers as part of the problem behind global environmental destruction and climate change. In *The True Cost of Coal*, the Bees also implicate North Americans as part of the problem behind climate change, but include scenes where Westerners (or at least Appalachians) are also part of positive responses to the problem, as illustrated by anthropomorphized Appalachian animals organizing, striking and building. In *Mesoamerica Resiste*, successful resistance in this part of the world is shown also shown by localized anthropomorphized animals, which means that Central Americans and Mexicans, not those from the United States, are shown as being part of the solution. Although many Bees are United States citizens and might not be able to completely transcend what Olson describes as “the history and perspectives of a Euro-U.S. hegemony” within their gaze, the Bees resist, and indeed critique, neocolonial narratives of the white Westerner coming into fix things (xvi).

### **Structural Adjustment Villains and Hidden Transcripts**

Those Western and transnational organizations that do try to “rescue” or control Mesoamerica are depicted as especially heinous. Beyond the map on the outside of the graphics campaign, bilingual banners declare the names behind the “Four Corners of Outsider Control”: the World Bank, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and Interamerican Development Bank. So as to not insult animals, villainous characters in *Mesoamerica* are always represented as heartless cyborgs and robots: human-like and wearing human clothing, but with missing faces and bodily parts replaced by machines. All four controlling organizations are portrayed as headless, heartless and

ruthless power-grabbers. In previous graphics campaigns, villainous characters were depicted as wasps (likely a play on white anglo-saxon protestants); Tyler Bee explains that they no longer use any animals to represent heinous characters because even animals like wasps and mosquitoes have their place within the ecosystem. The dehumanization of these financial organizations, and the implication that they are more harmful than malaria-causing insects, conveys the faceless and impersonal nature of the transnational financial organizations, and allows no room for considering that any of the organizations have programs that could benefit Central Americans; this intricate but somewhat heavy-handed section could easily be renamed the “Four Corners of Evil Villains.” In the

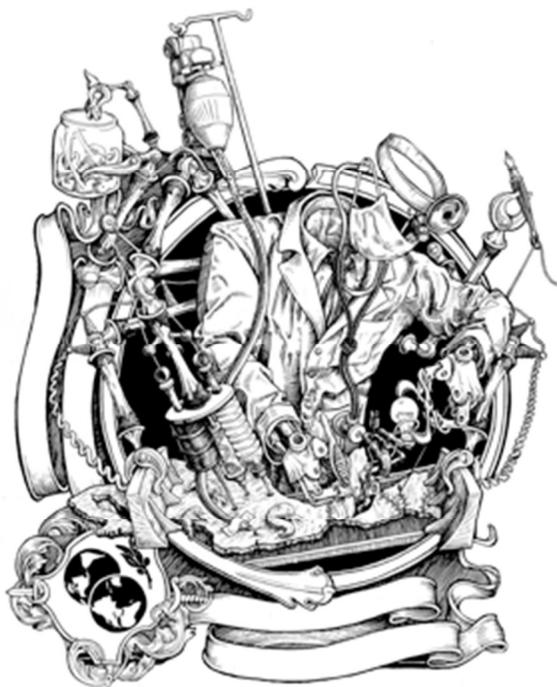


Figure 8, *Mesoamerica* detail

southwest corner, the structural-adjusting IMF is a headless surgeon, extracting the lifeblood from the patient of Central America on the operating table (fig. 8). Tyler explains structural adjustments (the economic restructuring “strings” countries in desperate situations must accept in exchange for emergency loans from the IMF) to the audience in an accessible tone. Right above this dismal scene, however, is a depiction of resistance;

quetzal birds continue indigenous weaving practices to make intricate and beautiful textiles (fig. 9).

Here, the hidden transcript exists just outside of the dominant narrative. Through utilizing the methods of visual narrative and transnational storytelling that illustrate both conquest and resistance, the Beehive Collective successfully shows the constructed and massive yet incomplete domination of subordinate people in Central America. Quickly though, the handcrafted fibers split above into a maquiladora scene of mass-produced clothes for the Global North, which implies low wages and long hours for Central

American women workers who have been displaced from their land and forced to compete on the global market. This small scene is but one example of many intentional juxtapositions of revealed injustice and creative resistance coinciding; neither domination nor resistance alone can show the larger picture. In the northeastern corner is another reminder of the legacy of colonialism, as the Interamerican



Figure 9, *Mesoamerica* detail

Development Bank is depicted as a headless conquistador with a cash register abdomen that spells out NAFTA spinning into CAFTA. The insides of the cash register reach into the middle of the map to connect with an oil pipeline. Above the headless conquistador is a regal-looking emblem of the North and South

American continents, flanked by an ink pen and a sword – two metaphorical and historical methods of conquest.

In the southeastern corner is the World Bank, illustrated as a bloated Monopoly-like character with one arm that produces gambling chips, and another arm a slot machine of “natural disasters” – cyclones, forest fires, tsunami – with a global lever (fig. 10). This scene serves to show the connection between burning



and climate change. The World Bank, which facilitates many different types of

Figure 10, *Mesoamerica* detail

fossil fuels and extreme weather patterns exacerbated by climate change. Below, the gambling chips on the world's continents are stacked much higher on North America and Eurasia than Africa and South America, to remind audiences of the uneven effects of globalization

programs, itself acknowledges that

poorer countries in the Global South are suffering more from the effects of climate change, and has called for wealthy countries in the Global South to do more to curb their emissions and billions of dollars in climate aid (Democracy). Although World Bank policies, many of which are neoliberal and destructive, are a fair and timely site for critique, the Bees' depiction of the World Bank as a villain and only a villain neglects examining deeper considerations of what those of us in the wealthy countries owe those in the Global South in terms of financial

reparations and aid.

The World Trade Organization is portrayed as a sinister, wig-wearing judge holding the strings of hanged Central Americans with obscured faces, who appear to represent activists and campesinos (fig. 11). In its other hand, the



Figure 11, *Mesoamerica* detail

judge attempts to play whack-a-mole on the heads of diverse global justice or anti-globalization movement activists: one one is a Guatemalan turtle, others are a masked Zapatista, a Hindu woman in solidarity (meant to be a representation of Vandana Shiva), a farmer activist with a machete, and a

miner, all with the signature revolutionary solidarity sign of raised left fists. The Bees do not offer “the answer” to the problems of neocolonial globalization they critique, but this and other scenes show that using “diverse tactics” offer the best chance for successful resistance (Resiste Narrative 7). Although it does include group organizing and protests, resistance more often is hidden within everyday lived politics. As James C. Scott says, “most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory of these two polar opposites” (Scott 136). The Bees always show oppression and resistance as

coexisting, and include more of the later on the inside of the poster.

At the bottom of the outside of *Mesoamerica* are those in control of much of the scene, as they have ownership of or influence over land and resource rights (fig. 12). Barons of tourism, petroleum, timber, pharmacological and water industries wear animal masks and slice into Mesoamerica's five-hundredth birthday cake. On the cake table is a poster of Noah's Ark, which draws attention



Figure 12, *Mesoamerica* detail

to the historical connections between colonialism and Christianity. Behind the barons' heads are a raging forest fire, a hurricane and a rain forest facade in front of a greenhouse. The Bees explain that this scene is meant to critique

industries' public relations attempts to green their image:

Under the guise of conservation, the biosphere nearby appears as a guarded greenhouse – particularly referring to the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, a project of the World Bank. This private-sector approach to conservation leads to evictions of Indigenous communities who have long been stewards of the land, while allowing industry access to 'protected' areas for activities including oil prospecting ... [and] to improve their public image. (Resiste Narrative 7)

The outside of *Mesoamerica* functions primarily to reveal the hidden

transcript of those in power. Exposing the ignoble intentions of transnational financial organizations and extractive industries, the outside is a hideous, black-and-white picture of neocolonialism, one the Bees argue is most accurate at its ugliest. Lest the audience become disheartened by the exploitation, Scott argues that “a partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript is always present in the public discourse of subordinate groups,” which the Bees show by depicting ants planting heirloom corn despite the pressure on farmers to use genetically modified seeds (19).

### **Communities as Viable Alternatives to Transnational Capitalism**

The inside of *Mesoamerica* shows that resistance is not futile, but fertile and growing; it is a hidden transcript of subordinate groups revealed with a celebratory and cohesive tone. The inside is double the size of the outside, which indicates what the Bees seek to present as worthy of more space and consideration; that is, “the bigger picture.” Although superhighways, extractive industries, a death squad and a power grid encroach on the inside from the edges, more than three-fourths of the inside is focused on celebrations, community interdependence and creative resistance (fig. 13). Whereas the inside



Figure 13, *Mesoamerica* detail

scenes of violence and exploitation are in black and white, the larger scenes of resistance are in brown tones with hints of light blue, and are drawn to show depth and texture that the depictions of exploitation lack.

Unlike the top-down viewpoint of the outside, the inside has an ant's view – a view from the ground up. Most visible from the ant's view are the trunk and massive roots of the ceiba tree, which spread throughout the forest celebration scene to “tell an overarching story of rootedness” (Resiste Narrative 10). This perspective also shows all the layers of the rain forest, from the bird-filled upper canopy, to the blooming flowers on the ground and the burrowed rodents beneath. All of the collective's graphics feature hundreds of species of native flora and fauna, some cyborgs, but no humans. Some, but not all of the animal characters are anthropomorphized. This choice allows many of the characters to be presented as gender neutral, although some are given gendered roles, such as female farmer bees and the maquiladora workers, a bat giving birth in the care

of midwives, and female snails taking on paramilitary figures (fig. 14). Such a balanced consideration of gender honors female legacies of birth and caregiving, while also showing females to be physically and emotionally strong. Although a full discussion of how gender roles are played out in Central America is outside



Figure 13, *Mesoamerica* detail

the scope of this thesis, the depictions in *Mesoamerica* show that living outside of the gender binary is possible and can be celebrated in Central America. Importantly, no scenes represent the colonial trope of white men “saving” brown women from brown men that Gayatri Spivak critiques, nor of white women teaching their ideas of

liberation to eager brown women; the locals do this on their own terms.

Notably, many scenes of collective resistance are nongendered, and depict the extraordinary in the everyday. Figure 15 shows a scene of collective do-it-ourselves resistance, in which nongendered bees make and use biogas to cook a corn-based community meal, while other bees create art. It is a scene of both practicality and community building, an area in which Gibson-Graham note is a ripe with possibilities of resistance: “around an emerging ethic of

consumption, with its technologies, bodily habits, moralities and waste possibilities, economic communities are formed, new commons emerge, and economic possibilities proliferate” (Gibson-Graham 333). Here, the essential and



Figure 14, *Mesoamerica* detail

historical labors of sustaining life through non-monetized, community cooking with local ingredients are depicted as a viable alternative to the junk food and genetically modified North American corn critiqued on the outside of the graphic. This scene shows that some traditional

Central American practices have existed for hundreds of years (like cooking together and some forms of art), while other Central American practices have evolved, such as learning to make and use renewable biogas as cooking fuel. Through this visual rhetorical choice, the Bees avoid the colonial stereotype of portraying indigenous peoples as mythical, lazy, unchanging and sexist, and instead show them as creative agents for their own livelihoods who possess contemporary ingenuity as well as respect for traditions (Memmi 79). They also reject World Bank-friendly depictions of indigenous peoples “as protoliberal subjects, as hungry for a modern, Western life as soon as it is made available to

them” (Olson xvi). The characters in the graphics campaign are depicted as wanting some changes in their lifestyles, and capable of being the ones to create those changes: development on their terms.

The biogas scene also functions as an example of how to (at least partially) free oneself from dependence on petroleum, coal and methane gas. An audience member from any part of the world, including the Global North, could see the use of biogas as one small way to address global fossil fuel dependency. Without implying that individual changes alone can overcome systemic inequalities, the inside scenes illustrate interconnections among household, local, regional and transnational methods of production. Rethinking what community economies can look like, along with deeper considerations of consumption, surplus distribution, the commons, and human and environmental needs helps “to distance us from the structural dynamics that have plagued economic theorizing, allowing us to represent an economy as a space of negotiated interdependence rather than a functional (or dysfunctional) growth machine” (Gibson-Graham 335). The Bees make a strong argument that Central Americans distancing themselves from top-down structures of outsider control is a liberating act.

In their consideration of the violence of development, Gibson-Graham acknowledge the difficult but necessary task of following critiques of development with viable alternatives to dominant structures. Gibson-Graham suggest that critics look to localized examples of successful resistance and alternatives to Empire (as described by Hardt and Negri) to provide guides for further

resistance, instead of attempting to counter globalized neoliberalism through grand narratives of an impending centralized revolution. The successes of local social movements call “into question the distinction between global revolution and local reform, showing that small-scale changes can be transformative, and that place-based politics can be a revolutionary force when replicated across a global terrain” (Violence 28). In figure 14, the Bees call attention to the legacy of violence from military, paramilitary, drug trafficking, private security forces and other violent power-seekers. One of the violent figures is masked in a similar fashion as the Zapatistas; when I asked the Bees about this, Tyler Bee told me that this character was not a Zapatista, but a death squad militant who also



Figure 16, *Mesoamerica* detail

women, this scene also functions as a critique of the gendered aspect of violence, violence overwhelmingly perpetrated by men. Although *Mesoamerica Resiste* does depict the scars from centuries of violence, domination and

wears a face mask. He said that others have been confused by this character. In this scene too, resistance is next to oppression: female snails overtake faceless soldiers while a ferocious boar blockades the invaders from reaching the larger community. As the narrative booklet notes that all the animals in this scene are

colonization, the graphics campaign is ultimately a celebration of social resistance, a story of hidden transcripts growing in community spaces and collectively emerging in public. As Scott affirms, “the social spaces where the hidden transcript grows are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power” (119). Behind a tourist-friendly display of culture for sale, an ancestor porpoise drums and a big crab blows into a conch shell in their fight “for recognition of ancestral lands” (Resiste Narrative 12, fig. 16). Yes, there is struggle, but the Bees show this fight as one powerful and



Figure 17, *Mesoamerica* detail

cohesive enough to no longer be hidden, but public. In the middle of the poster, diverse community members gathering to organize, share stories and celebrate (Fig. 17 and 18). Although the graphics campaign does show that “the social sites of the hidden transcript are those locations in which the unspoken riposte, stifled anger, and bitten tongues created by relations of domination find a vehement, full-throated expression,” resistance, and its accompanying joy, creativity and music are depicted as bigger and more powerful than the legacy of colonialism and the influence of neocolonialism (Scott 120). *Mesoamerica*



*Resiste* is both a tribute to historical and contemporary resistance within Central America, and an educational tool that can empower global audiences in their own, interrelated struggles against transnational neoliberalism. The greatest strength of this visual narrative is its ability to clearly convey to an everyday audience the

Figure 18, *Mesoamerica* detail

connections between 500 years of colonial and neocolonial resource extraction, militarism and violence, global capitalism, class inequality, the landbase and individual lives.

Chapter Three: The Beehive Design Collective Critiques Transnational  
Capitalism Through *The True Cost of Coal*

**Identification within an Oppositional Narrative**

The Collective's graphics campaign *The True Cost of Coal: Mountaintop Removal and the Fight for Our Future* uses a transnational feminist lens to examine the wide-ranging effects of coal mining, globalization and industrialization in Appalachia and the larger world (True, fig. 2). In presentations to various communities in the U.S., South America and Europe, the Bees discuss the graphics campaign through relaying the stories of Appalachian people who have been affected by coal-mining and mountaintop removal. According to Amy Skonieczny, "the task of any critical engagement with the dominant discourse of globalization is, in part, to reassert the 'open' nature of political economy and to put people back into the analysis; in other words, to assert contingency and agency in opposition to inevitability" (3). Through utilizing the methods of visual narrative and transnational storytelling that illustrate both conquest and resistance, the Beehive Collective successfully shows the constructed and contingent nature of coal monoculture in Appalachia and global corporate dominance. English scholars and rhetoricians can examine *The True Cost of Coal* to better understand how to construct visual arguments that challenge conceptions of resource extraction as inevitable.

In *The True Cost of Coal*, the Bees employ a rhetoric of identification to encourage viewers to feel personally and collectively related to the cycle of resource extraction, consumption and disposal:

You are a part of this story. So are we. From our collective dependence on coal- powered electricity to our collective ability to organize for climate justice, we are each implicated in the struggle for the mountains, which is really the struggle for all places. Though we cannot pretend to speak for the daily lived realities of the coalfields of Appalachia, we are listening to the wisdom of those that do, and are striving to create a tool to help us all decipher these overwhelming times we are living through (Narrative 2).

In so far as one person's interests are joined with another, or share a common principle, their interests are identified with another person (Burke 20). Kenneth Burke calls this co-identification "consubstantiality" (20-21). By the Bees implicating themselves and the audience members as simultaneously part of the problem, part of those who are being negatively affected by coal-dependency, and as a part of the solution, the Collective invites audiences to identify with them, or to at least examine their relationship to coal. This "problem *and* solution" or "polluters *and* potential change-makers" approach queers the Burkean concept of



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Figure 15, *The True Cost of Coal* detail

identification as (simply) compensatory to division (22), and allows for an examination of resource extraction and usage that implicates the audience in complicated and constructive ways. According to Carolyn Erler, “making this two-part leap of identification is critical to becoming a worker in the anti-globalization, pro-environment, pro-human/indigenous rights movement” (91).

In *The True Cost of Coal*, the scenes and images in are intentionally juxtaposed and overlapped to tell stories of interconnections and histories and to create a visual argument. In front of audiences, presenter Bees verbally explain these interconnections; non-live audiences can download a narrative explanatory booklet to accompany viewing the graphic. Microscenes of violent conquest of land and people are consistently placed next to scenes that depict resistance and resilience; this technique, combined with the lack of a linear timeline, teaches the viewer that environmentally destructive practices like mountaintop removal are neither inevitable nor uncontested. The graphic is divided into five overlapping sections: Ancestors, Colonization and Industrialization, Mountaintop Removal and Climate Chaos, Resistance, and Regeneration. The graphic is designed to be displayed two different ways: folded in on itself, so the Ancestors and Regeneration are next to each other and the destruction in the middle is concealed; and opened to reveal the historical changes, environmental destruction and current resistance in Appalachia. On the far left of the graphic, the Ancestors section begins with a 300 million year old history of the Appalachian Mountains and of coal, which was formed by decomposing plant matter, the descendants of which are represented in the graphic in the form of

ferns, horsetails and mosses (fig. 19). Viewers are encouraged to remember the Cherokee natives of Appalachia and their own ancestors: “(W)hether our ancestors were indigenous Cherokee or belonged to some very different place, somewhere in all our family histories are folks who knew how to live in a seasonal way in a cyclical world” (Narrative 4).

As in previous graphics campaigns, some, but not all of the animal characters are anthropomorphized. Many of the characters are presented as



Figure 20, *True Cost* detail

gender neutral, although some are given gendered roles, such as the “possum mama” and the “Miner Frog” referred to as “he” (Narrative 12). There are multiple scenes throughout the graphic that positively depict sustainable household and sustenance labor; notably, the Bees use gender-neutral terms like “folks” and “community” and

usually avoid dressing the animal characters in gendered clothing. Some of these scenes of sustainability are immediately next to scenes that depict colonization

and violent resource extraction in Appalachia; this intentional placement shows the effects of the transformation from sustenance economies to coal monoculture on personal, local and transnational systems (fig. 20). Later scenes in the “Regeneration” section of the graphic depict the reclaiming of household labor as an effective way to resist the lonely lifestyle of only being consumers and waste producers. As Safri and Graham observe, “(r)ecognizing households as global players alongside multinational firms, nation-states and international institutions



Figure 16, *True Cost* detail

also changes how we understand the unfolding of globalization” (113). Without implying that individual changes alone can overcome, say, the influence of Peabody Coal, these scenes illustrate interconnections among household, local, regional and transnational methods of production. The second

section in *The True Cost of Coal* depicts colonization and industrialization – two key concepts the Bees show to be historically and currently linked. Throngs of European colonist birds fly into the area on the heels of the initial Scots-Irish immigrants. This show the new agenda for the land of Appalachia; a site for

resource extraction and the production of wealth. This scene also shows the Cherokee Trail of Tears, with an emaciated mountain lion and salamander with the bilingual Cherokee and English-language paper *The Phoenix* marching to Oklahoma. Interestingly, the Bees refer to Appalachia as a colony in the present tense as well, a rhetorical move that many viewers might not have heard associated with contemporary Appalachia. They build the case of Appalachia as still a colony through depictions of property deeds stolen by coal companies, public water supplies poisoned by coal mining, company-store-style authoritarian control of the land and the economy, and an overarching narrative of industrialized countries dependent on the exploitation of Appalachian resources



Figure 22, *True Cost* detail

and workers. Carolyn Eler describes an earlier Beehive graphics campaign, *Plan Colombia*, as “an oppositional narrative that [points] out gaps, flaws, and discontinuities in the dominant narrative” of globalization (Eler 87). The Bees continue the technique of oppositional narrative in *The True Cost of Coal* by visually challenging energy-company teleological claims of progress and simplistic slogans (fig. 21) The

Bees' choice to represent the slogan "Coal keeps the lights on" on a billboard in front of corporate skyscrapers that overlooks a sinister-looking factory conveys an oppositional narrative: coal does more than keep the lights on. The coal-fired factory, according to the Bees' narrative booklet, represents the dual meaning of 'American Power.' Not only is the US military the biggest consumer of fossil fuels in the world, it is often the US government's tool of choice for securing access to 'energy resources' (i.e. other people's stuff) around the globe. Endless war is a huge consumer of coal, and for the US (the 'Saudi Arabia of Coal'), an energy-independence agenda means more coal extraction (11, fig. 2 and 22). Bullets, coal and crushed miners helmets go into the factory to make it run; military missiles and tanks, toxic waste and black smoke come out. Next to factory's barbed-wire fence is a sign that encourages people to watch for immigrants. This scene represents what Nancy Naples calls a "feminist challenge" to "the division of social, political and economic life into these separate spheres. The role of the military in supporting multinational corporations provides the most powerful illustration of the intersection of civil society, the state and economic institutions" (Naples 275). Here, the military-industrial complex and the coal industry are co-implicated in the destruction and exploitation of Appalachia, Afghanistan, Iraq and other places the US military has or had a presence. The factory also shows what else coal mining and mountaintop removal do besides keep the lights on: fuel endless patterns of consumerism, poison water supplies, contribute to erosion and floods, and decimate non-mining jobs and local economies. Because topless mountains are eyesores, coal mining companies have come up with

ideas for “development” of “reclaimed” mining sites, chiefly building prisons, golf courses and Walmarts. The Bees refer to Walmart, located right next to the factory on the base of a blasted mountain, as “the new face of the company store” where “the Walmart mono-economy means dollars earned by miners purchase goods produced ‘cheaply’ in US-owned factories overseas” (Narrative 9). The use of visual argument allows the Bees to explain complex socio-political and economic systems powerfully and evocatively, complexities that can be



Figure 23, *True Cost* detail

relayed differently when utilizing visual elements instead of strictly verbal.

**Depicting the Limits of Individual Choices within Transnational Systems**

As Moghadam discusses, transnational social movements are “response” to the downside of globalization, specifically, neoliberal

capitalism” (28). The rhetoric of neoliberalism, according to Lisa Duggan, “promotes the *privatization* of the costs of social reproduction, along with the care of human dependency needs, through *personal responsibility* exercised in the family and in civil society – thus shifting the costs from state agencies to individuals and households” (Duggan 14). According to the rhetoric of personal

responsibility, individuals have the power to improve their situation through hard work and responsible behavior; structural or legal changes are unnecessary or counter-productive. In our personal correspondence, T.K. Bee explains that some audience members still have difficulty understanding why Appalachians and Central Americans do not simply leave their difficult situations for something else; many activists and academics must hear similar thoughts from their audiences and students. Perhaps academics and academics can learn how to illustrate a nuanced critique of the neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility by studying the *True Cost* scene, “The Dance of Hard Choices”, which depicts the immense difficulty many Appalachians face in finding alternatives to working for the coal industry (fig. 23).

A non-unionized coal miner is represented by a mountain chorus frog, a common animal in Appalachia. As amphibians, frogs are relatively low on the food chain and have skins and bodies that are especially susceptible to changes from environmental pollution. In the graphic, Miner Frog listens to headphones while blowing up the mountains that he lives around, an action that contributes to poisoned water supplies that could make him and his community sick. He goes to the doctor – notably depicted as an ass with a pharmaceutical company jacket next to a case of pricey bottled water – who gives him a prescription for an illness that the graphic implies is related to the water supply poisoned by mountaintop removal runoff. At the end of the day, Miner Frog goes back to work for the coal company to keep up with the bills and pills, because in a coal-based economy, it’s either “that, flip burgers, or leave town” (Narrative 14). This scene shows that

in corporate-dominated, coal monoculture Appalachia, work and personal choices are limited by forces beyond an individual's control. "The Dance of Hard Choices" depicts disempowerment, and illustrates the myriad aspects of life that coal mining directly impacts: work, health, income, access to clean water, and the landscape of people's communities. Given the constrained choices Miner Frog has, viewers could use this scene to reflect on their own limited choices in a neoliberal economy.

Although the Bees don't propose one specific solution to challenging the forces they graphically critique, *The True Cost of Coal* does function as a "recruitment poster of a different kind" (Erler 91). At the very least, the Bees recruit viewers to thoughtfully consider their relationship to coal extraction and energy, and invite viewers to join or support resistance to corporate coal monoculture through "critical reflection and strategic action" (Narrative 20). One potential difficulty of using the graphics campaign to try to inspire action is the scale of the problems the graphic conveys, problems that the Bees acknowledge do not have clear answers and cannot be solved by individual actions alone. In his studying of argument and changes in behaviors, Daniel J. O'Keefe writes that "a lack of perceived behavioral control can be an important barrier to people's engaging in a behavior" (26). The idea of radically changing the system of transnational coal extraction, shipment and usage can feel so daunting as to be disempowering for individuals and organization. O'Keefe suggests that two ways activists can try to combat this are to simply to provide information, and to offer examples of successful performances (26). When ultimate success (or failure) is

on as large of scale as climate change and resource extraction, it is impossible to provide an example an environmental success on a similar scale. Still, examples of situational successes illustrated in *The True Cost of Coal* could be useful for combating feelings of futility. Scenes of resistance and resilience are always next to the scenes of monumental injustice. The visual narrative choices in *The True Cost of Coal* shows that an economy and social order based on finite resource extraction is highly pervasive, but not monolithic or inevitable.



Figure 17, *True Cost* detail

Throughout the graphic, *The True Cost of Coal* interweaves scenes that depict ancestral local knowledge with current scenes of creative defiance (locals ignoring “keep out-company land” signs and hunting on those lands anyway, do-gooder outsider activists, including the Bees,

crash-landing in Appalachia to help) and future scenes of reclaimed mountains with flying kites, wind turbines and sharing dish duty (fig. 24). *The True Cost of Coal* builds a case for the seven generations approach to land management; that is, for the current generation to remember what the previous three generations did, and to think about how their current actions will effect the next three

generations. Through their critical depiction of a buffet of “false solutions”, which features nuclear power, ethanol, a hydroelectric dam, another wind turbine, and “clean” coal (wittily depicted as a lump of coal with a soap bubble) the Bees push the position that any movement toward true sustainability must be based in land-based practices of the past that value household and sustenance labor.

Fleckenstein writes that material rhetorics “testify to community members that the world is configured in one way and not another; by doing so, they weld those members into a community” (11). The greatest strength of this visual narrative is its ability to clearly convey to an everyday audience the connections between resource extraction, militarism and violence, global capitalism, class inequality, water quality, the landbase and individual lives. I argue that the Beehive Design Collective utilizes a model of empowerment through teaching a better understanding of the global and local politics of resource control and extraction in Appalachia and throughout the world.

Without graphic representations and explanations, the histories and horrors of fossil fuel extraction, militarism, neoliberal corporate dominance and environmental destruction can be dense and overpowering, and the connections among them unclear. This could be part of why the critiques of neoliberalism seem to be primarily found only in specific academic and activist circles, even though neoliberalism’s transnational effects impact society globally. When discussing the potential for graphic cartoon drawings as visual arguments, Blair says “the multilayered meanings and associations of various visual cultural icons generate powerful resonances around simple pen-and-ink drawings” (55). The

ink drawings in *The True Cost of Coal* go well beyond “simple”, and are all the more powerful for their visual complexity combined with a clear narrative.

Ultimately, *The True Cost of Coal* is an educational tool that critically explains neoliberal globalization through its intense but relatively accessible visual argument.

## Conclusion: Beginning Conversations

In the time between *Mesoamerica Resiste*'s initial conception and its completion, a significant rhetorical shift occurred in the realm of transnational social justice: the change in the movement's label from "anti-globalization movement" to "global justice movement." Both terms have historically considered indigenous peoples' rights, women's rights, strong critiques of capitalism, and environmentalist perspectives. Although the former term is still occasionally used, this shift from being against globalization to identifying as a global or transnational movement is a significant difference in framing problems and solutions to the shortcomings of globalization. This shift is reflected in the Central American social movements the Bees depict. As Prashad notes, "if globalization from above produced the objective conditions of deprivation in Latin America, a globalization from below enhanced the planetary movement for a better world" (Prashad 18). Essentially, what the Bees successfully show are interruptions to teleological scripts of monoculture globalization.

The graphics campaigns are a uniquely flexible activist's tool; they can function as medium on their own, or as visual talking points during presentations. But to understand them more requires some form of a conversation or interaction with words, in the form of a presentation, a conversation with a Bee, a conversation with a fellow attendee, or by looking at the narrative campaign booklet. In the simplest of terms, the Bees' graphics campaigns present the

concept of life versus death: life within biodiversity and cultural diversity, and death as extraction, pollution and monoculture. *Mesoamerica Resiste* shows a more cut-and-dry, good folks versus bad folks system, which Tyler Bee explains is mostly a reflection of the perspectives of the people who made it. The graphics campaign illustrates the dehumanizing aspects of neoliberal globalization, with a focus on the wrongdoings of institutions rather than those of individuals. This allows audiences in the Global North a flexibility of identification; perhaps they will see themselves as part of the problem, but the Bees presentation takes a wide enough look that audience members can have more complex reactions than just feeling guilty or overwhelmed. Although the graphics campaigns depict problems and injustices in Central America and Appalachia committed by outsiders, they do not address the question of what reparations can or should be made by those outsiders, besides simply letting Central Americans and Appalachians make their own choices. *True Cost* gives more consideration of what structural changes could look like, though it does not address the big question of who pays. Both graphics campaigns show what those of us in the North take and the trash we unload, but neither consider how our collective debts to the Global South and Appalachia have racked up, or how to pay them back. Importantly, *Mesoamerica* does not clearly imply that the Global North should make financial reparations, though it does imply that Global Northerners have stolen from and contributed to the suffering of Central Americans.

At nearly every presentation I have attended that addresses large-scale economic, social and environmental problems, by the Bees or otherwise,

someone in the crowd asks what they can do, or what changes society can make. Although it might not be fair for those who point out structural problems to be expected to have all of the solutions, task-driven Americans who ask these questions want to be shown that there is a clear path that they can follow that will change what they find wrong. To their credit, and possibly to the frustration of others, the Bees present no such prescriptions. They give no plug for, say, buying Fair Trade, voting a certain way or supporting specific political movements. In many ways, this is a refreshing foil to well-intended but shallow calls to adopt conscious consumerism habits, which can give the false impression that individuals' buying power alone can change the world. Different Bees have different ideas of what will affect change best, which they depict in the diversity of resistance tactics in *Mesoamerica* and *True Cost*. Their rhetorical choice to not have a specific call to action allows a wider audience to consider the problems with the status quo. As one who thinks countries in the Global North should have to change their policies and give reparations to the Global South for contributing so much to climate change and environmental destruction, I initially thought that the Bees missed an opportunity to call for structural change by not addressing reparations. Then, I realized that the graphics campaigns were functioning just as they were intended – as community conversation starters, not the final word from an authority figure. Perhaps many other activists and academics spend too much energy on convincing their audiences that they have “the answer,” and overlook the role of creativity and community conversation in the realm of social change. As Fleckenstein notes, “community is constituted as

much by the images we see and the visual conventions we share as it is by the words we speak and the discourse conventions we share” (5). Studying and adopting the creative methods of the Beehive Design Collective could help academics and activists spread discourse conventions to a wider community, and could even be a liberating act.

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