



I CAN

*and*

I WILL

A Protest Toolkit

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Capstone Project

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**“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”**

Fred Rogers



# Introduction

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In times of major social and political upheaval, many people ask, **“What can I do to help?”** It is a very human reaction to evaluate one’s skills and apply them to help people who are suffering, or capture a zeitgeist for posterity. Protesting and protest art have a long and storied history in the United States, starting with before the founding of the country and continuing into the present day. Protest design, however, is more new and subtle, with rapid and exciting developments over the past few decades.

Protest design lives in the world and does something to engage people with social issues. It can be a poster that reacts to an event, like a poster that implores people to wear a mask to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, or a designed sign for a physical protest march. But many proponents of protest design encourage designers to have a little more imagination beyond making a poster. **Protest design is very similar to “human-centered design” and “design thinking” in that it puts people and their problems first. Then it protests the unjust nature of their situation, or presents a possible solution to it.** An example of protest design might

be, for instance, the bright pink see-saws built on the US/Mexico border by architects Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael in 2019 (Rosenberg 2019). The protest was against then-President Donald Trump’s border wall, which many see as xenophobic and a waste of government resources. By showing American and Mexican children and families playing with the see-saws despite being separated by the border wall, San Fratello and Rael illustrated the similarity of these families despite Trump’s divisive rhetoric (Rosenberg 2019).

In this pamphlet, you will find a toolkit and manifesto to get started with your own protest design projects. **You do not need to be a graphic designer to participate in protest design.** Indeed, many of the examples contained herein are in the realm of cooking, coding, sewing, whiskey distilling, game design, and even buying a plot of land and founding a farm. The most important thing to remember is:

**Use what you have  
Do what you can**

# Protest Art

## *versus*

**P**rotest art and graphic design have a long and colorful history, as the artists/designer's desire for self-expression is often at odds with capitalistic needs to produce art that sells (either itself, or to advertise something else). In "First Things First," the British design manifesto from 1964, Ken Garland and 20 other designers, photographers, artists and students expressed frustration with the capitalistic machine of design in the midcentury. "In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached a saturation point at which the high-pitched scream of

consumer selling is no more than sheer noise," they write. "We think there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on" (Garland 1964).

**T**his is not to say that protest art can't sell; it often does. But it's not really made to sell. To sell it to raise money for a cause is okay, but turning a profit on protest art or using it for self-promotion undermines its message, many argue. In that way, protest art is a pure form of communications design, with emphasis on communication.

# Protest Design

**P**rotest design, on the other hand, conveys a message through interaction and/or intervention. The audience learns the message through interacting with the design. Protest design is also more optimistic than protest art. It has the potential to present viewers with a vision of a better world.

**S**ocial designer Thomas Markussen defines protest design as something that adopts the "disruptive aesthetic" of protest art while being a "designerly intervention" in people's lives (Markussen 2013). In layman's terms, think of a poster

that encourages people to vote. Then, think of a website that adopts this poster's aesthetic, but actually registers people to vote. The website is a piece of design that has intervened in people's lives.

**I**n the simplest terms, think of protest design as "I can, and I will." "I can" is your talents, "I will" is your protest. Again, protest design doesn't have to be graphic design, and it doesn't have to be a permanent or practical solution to the problem you are protesting. It is just you using what you have to do what you can.

**"I can" is your talents,  
"I will" is your protest**

# The 7 Types of

- 1 “demonstration artifact:” using design to show alternatives to a problem
- 2 “act of communication:” storytelling, data visualization, semiotics, and others
- 3 “conventional actions:” standard protest actions such as communicating with elected representatives

# Protest Design

- 4 “service artifacts:” pieces of design intended to serve people
- 5 “events:” conferences, exhibitions, and others
- 6 “protest artifacts:” pieces of design that are critical of a situation or institution
- 7 “introspection:” acknowledging where design has been complicit in upholding oppressive structures



# Case Studies

These examples protest a current societal ill by either producing an engaging interactive protest experience or illustrating how a better world is possible.

## Uncle Nearest Whiskey

Upon discovering that a slave named Nathan “Nearest” Green taught a young Jack Daniels how to distill whiskey, Fawn Weaver took it upon herself to preserve Nearest’s process by founding Uncle Nearest Whiskey. Through interacting



with the whiskey, the audience learns Nearest’s almost-forgotten story



## Gayblade

Ryan Best coded the game Gayblade during the AIDS crisis to protest politicians’ inaction to the public health crisis. (The final boss is anti-gay politician Pat Buchanan.) Through interaction in playing the game, the user unfolds the protest themselves



## Comfort Farms

Veteran Jon Jackson was disillusioned with the resources currently available for veterans fighting PTSD. He founded Comfort Farms in Milledgeville, GA to illustrate a better world by giving veterans routine and access to nature as a way to alleviate their PTSD symptoms

## Lovecraft Country/Watchmen

Through genre fiction (horror for Lovecraft Country, superhero comics for Watchmen), these two HBO shows renewed interest in forgotten American history. Lovecraft Country teaches many people about sundown towns and Watchmen helped spur Oklahoman politicians to acknowledge the Tulsa Black Wall Street Massacre



## The New Mississippi State Flag

Mississippi, a state in the Deep South that was part of the Confederacy in the Civil War, adopted the Confederate battle flag as part of its flag in 1894. In summer 2020, Mississippi drafted a bill to change their flag and released a call for designs. The winning design came from Asian-American Mississippi native Sue Anna Joe, who replaced the “stars and bars” Confederate flag with a magnolia bloom, a symbol she chose to represent her childhood home.

# I Can: Sew

## I Will: Donate Fabric Scrap Masks

### Practicing Radical Sew- Cialism

The protest design here is three-fold, if you'll pardon the pun:

1. The mask itself has become a protest, one that says, "I believe science and care for my fellow human beings"
2. Using fabric scraps is environmentalist, protesting a wasteful industry
3. Protesting government indifference that led to this shortage
4. And finally, who these masks go to is a protest. They are being sent to Love Yourself No More Abuse, a

domestic violence shelter in Georgia

It's one thing to sew all of these and then keep them for myself, and during the pandemic I've been donating to local hospitals and medical facilities. But medical professionals are not the only vulnerable populations that need masks right now. Domestic violence has seen a surge in the pandemic, and Love Yourself No More Abuse has called for people to send them masks, so I answered.





Are you a US citizen?

Are you a resident of the precinct in which you are voting?

Will you be 18 on Election Day?

Are you not a felon?

I Can:  
Code

**M**y project Space Abrams Voting Video Game turns voting rights advocate Stacey Abrams into a superhero fighting voter suppression in outer space (via a 1970s Asteroids Atari game engine written in JavaScript). As she “flies” around space, text appears which coincides with Georgia’s voter registration requirements: “Are you a resident of the county in

which you are voting? Will you be 18 on Election Day? Are you a felon? Are you a US citizen?” If the user double-clicks on the text, the website redirects them to the Georgia voter registration page. If they are already registered or not eligible, they are also able to play the classic Atari “Asteroids” game in their browser.

I Will:  
Register  
Voters

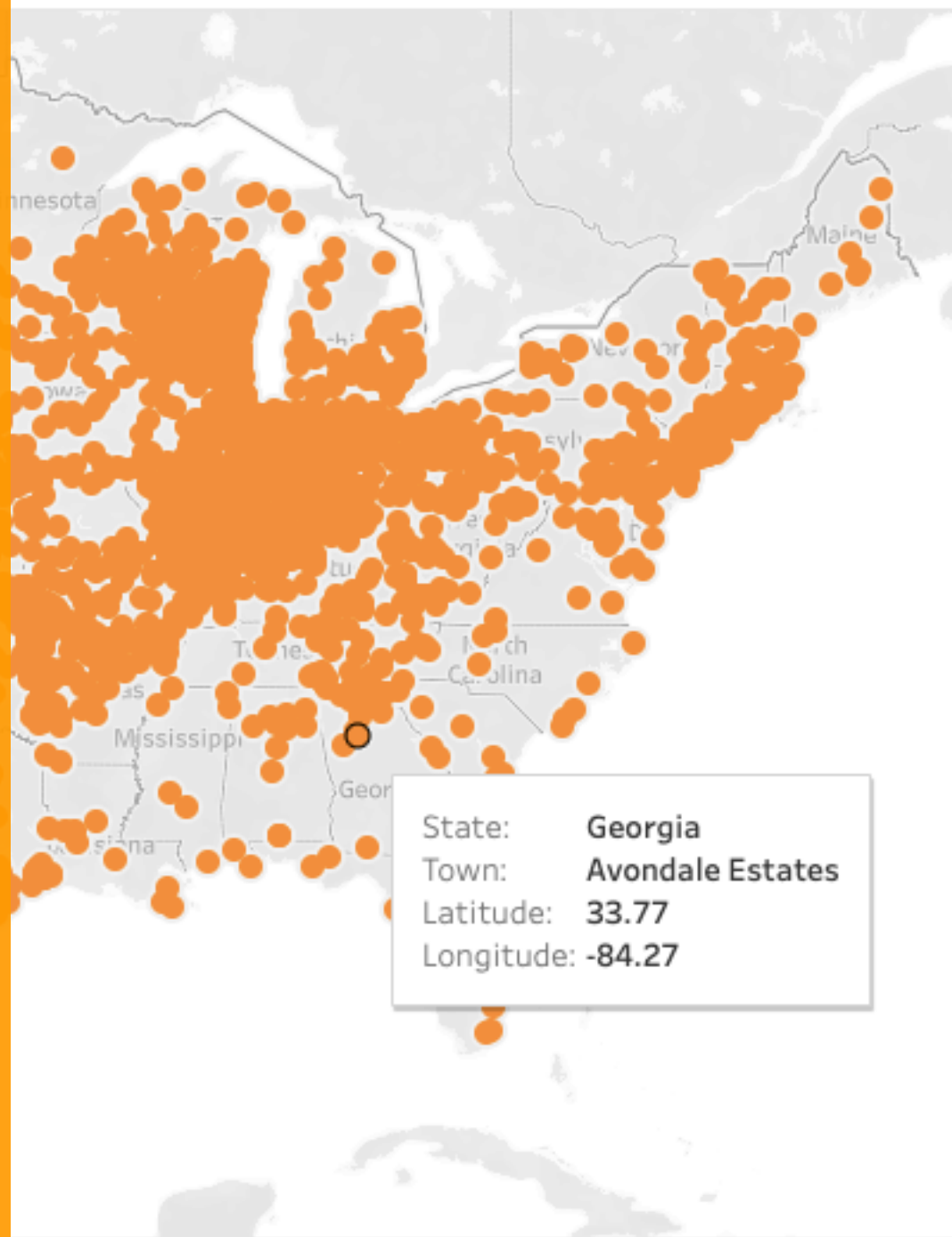
# I Can: Visualize Data

## I Will: Expose Racism

“Sundown towns” and counties were places where racial and religious minorities and white immigrants such as Irish and Italian Americans were told to “be out by sundown” by any means necessary or face violent consequences such as harassment, beatings, and lynchings (Scruggs 2010). These towns and counties were popular and numerous after Reconstruction until the civil rights movement, when integration forced these racist towns to switch methods from violent expulsion to more subtle zoning and redlining (Loewen 2006).

James Loewen is a sociologist who has been studying sundown towns for decades. “When I began this research, I expected to find about 10 sundown towns in Illinois (my home state) and perhaps 50 across the country. Instead, I have found about 507 in Illinois and thousands across the United States” (Loewen 2006). His work inspired author Matt Ruff,

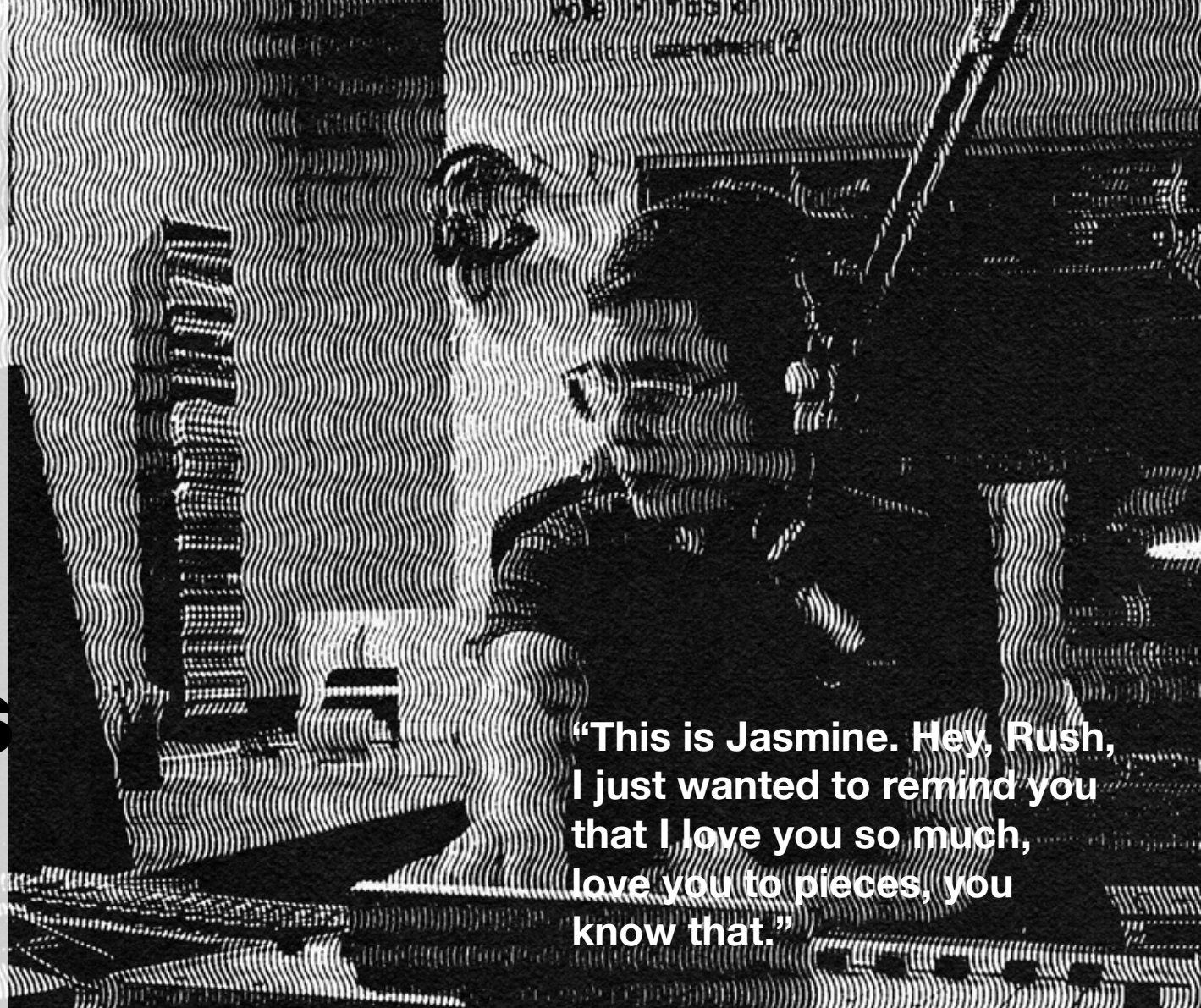
who wrote the novel *Lovecraft Country* about a Black man who encounters H.P. Lovecraft monsters in addition to the Jim Crow-era racism and sundown towns he was already dealing with (Ruff 2016). That novel was adapted by Misha Green for an HBO show in 2020, which is how I learned about Ruff’s novel and the issue of sundown towns. I looked at Loewen’s work and identified where my own skills as a designer could intervene: a mapping data visualization illustrating where sundown towns are. I took Loewen and his collaborator Steven Berry’s work identifying where sundown towns and counties are and geocoded them so they would be recognized on Tableau as a map. I shared it with Loewen, who gave constructive criticism that I need to include nuance in the data to distinguish current and former sundown towns and counties, among other things. Ergo this act of communication piece of protest design is an ongoing project as I refine the data more.





# I Can: DJ

## I Will: Connect Prisoners & Their Families



**“This is Jasmine. Hey, Rush, I just wanted to remind you that I love you so much, love you to pieces, you know that.”**

**R**ae Garringer is a radio producer of WMMT-FM 88.7 in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Usually the station plays folk, bluegrass, and old-school hip hop such as Tupac and OutKast. But on Monday nights at 9, Garringer takes callers who want to talk to their incarcerated loved ones at nearby Eastern Kentucky Correctional Complex in a radio show called “Calls from Home.”

**C**alls from Home began in the 1990s when “a woman called WMMT and told the DJ that her brother, newly imprisoned nearby, listened to the show every Monday night and asked if the DJ could dedicate a request. “It just kind of grew from there,” recalls WMMT’s longtime general manager, Elizabeth Sanders” (Lee 2020).

**T**he protest of Calls from Home, much like many examples in this zine, comes from showing compassion to a vulnerable population. The population of many prisons in rural areas in the US are Black even when the surrounding towns are overwhelmingly white: “The prison boom has reshaped who is living in Central Appalachia. The U.S. Census estimated in 2019 that Letcher

County’s population was 0.6% Black. In contrast, at the massive Eastern Kentucky Correctional Complex in West Liberty, north of Whitesburg, the inmate population is 31% Black, according to the Kentucky Department of Corrections’ 2018 annual report (Lee 2020). Therefore, Calls from Home is a protest design drop in the bucket in prison abolition, anti-racism, and rural activism.

# I Can: Design Printed Pieces

## I Will: Discuss Voting Rights

In my “Battleground States” zine, I collect art and photography from contributors who are actually from Georgia and other battleground states about their experience with the 2020 presidential election and the work that continues to be done in the region. As with “Space Abrams,” I wanted to bring to attention the Senate runoff election in January 2021 as Georgia and other rural regions are often abandoned by the larger political machine after presidential elections. I tweaked “Type Your Truth” to reflect more rural aesthetics, using donated photographs of the Appalachian mountains, and

asked people to use the website to say something brief about their experiences with the 2020 election. I got two responses, one from a person who cut family ties over politics and another who lives in pandemic lockdown in her hometown where she doesn’t agree with their politics. The zine ends with actionable resources for voting in the Georgia Senate runoff election. This is an act of communication and a protest artifact—it is critical of this political machine, thought it still translates these narratives into helpful actions that people can make.





# I Can: Cook

# I Will: Comfort Grieving Families



## Sweet Potato Comfort Pies

Giving comfort food to grieving families is a storied tradition, but Rose McGee takes it into the protest design realm by giving her sweet potato pies to families that have experienced police violence. There is also an element of preserving Black food traditions through making sweet potato pie.

## Rose McGee's Sweet Potato Comfort Pie



### INGREDIENTS

Makes Two 9" Pies

- 4 medium size sweet potatoes, cooked
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 stick of butter, melted
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 teaspoon ginger
- 1 tablespoon nutmeg
- 1 tablespoon cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons vanilla extract
- 1 cup milk (whole, evaporated or condensed)
- 1 teaspoon lemon extract
- 2 unbaked pie shells

### DIRECTIONS

Use a Hand-Mixer or KitchenAid™ Type Mixer

- Preheat oven at 400 degrees;
- In a large mixing bowl, mash the cooked sweet potatoes.
- Blend in sugar. Blend in eggs. Blend in melted butter.
- One at a time, add next 6 ingredients; mix well.
- Pour into pie shells.
- Reduce heat to 350 degrees. Bake for 60-minutes.
- Remove from oven. Allow pies to set (firm) for at least 30 minutes.
- Eat warm or allow to cool longer before eating.

# TURN YOUR

## Tear Out These Cards and Serve Your Community

What will you do? How will you do it? Recall the seven types of protest design **demonstration** artifact, act of communication, conventional actions, service artifacts, events, protest artifacts and introspection. Use what you have. Do what you can.

**“I can” is your talents,  
“I will” is your protest**

**I Can:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I Will:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I Can:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I Will:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I Can:** \_\_\_\_\_

**I Will:** \_\_\_\_\_



**I Can:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**I Will:** \_\_\_\_\_

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## Photo Credits (in order of appearance)

1. Fred Rogers; Wikipedia
2. Teeter-Totter Wall; Rael San Fratello
3. Fawn Weaver picture; Eric Charbonneau for BizJournals
4. GayBlade; Wikipedia
5. Jon Jackson; Jonathan Wade for Good Grit Magazine
6. *Lovecraft Country*; HBO
7. Rae Gallinger; Tom Lee
8. Rose McGee's sweet potato pie; SweetPotatoComfortPies.org
9. Back cover: Clermont, GA; Carol Cummings

**"Not everything  
that is faced  
can be  
changed. But  
nothing can be  
changed until it  
is faced."**

James Baldwin

