



821

# The People's Practice

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OUR COMMUNITIES  
ARE STORIED.

ARTWORK BY JOE WILLIAMS



## WHO'S WRITING THE STORIES ABOUT WHERE WE LIVE AND WHAT OUR LIVES OUR LIKE?

The authors come from outside the community. They bring their biases and their blinders. They see folks standing on the corner, and their keyboard clatters out crime. They see the row of shuttered buildings, and the notes read investment risk. They see the park where no one is gathering, and they remind themselves to tell a friend that this is a blank slate for their idea. They take that tour, and they drive away, and they write the stories about how communities of color are failing, and those stories take hold in the machinery of pop culture and nightly news and white papers.

## WHO'S WRITING THE STORIES ABOUT WHERE WE LIVE AND WHAT OUR LIVES OUR LIKE?

The authors come from inside the community. They inhale and exhale this place every single day. They see folks standing on the corner, and they know their neighbors. They see the row of shuttered buildings, and they note to themselves what used to be and what could be again. They see the park where no one is gathering, and they remind themselves that this community needs livable wages to be able to enjoy assets and reliable public investment to make those assets something to enjoy. They take that community, and they walk away, and they tell the stories of how their community of color is persevering, and they might not have the platform to make outsiders care, but that doesn't mean their story isn't truer, more proximate, and closer to community needs and community solutions.

## IN THE ROUGH AND TUMBLE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, THINGS LIKE STORIES AND NARRATIVES CAN GET LOST IN THE MIX.

However, just because residents and practitioners lack the time and resources to narrate their own story doesn't mean others aren't telling their own. There's a long history of pop culture and mass media creating caricatures of what communities of color are and are not. Stories of dysfunction and risk generate a profit; if it bleeds, it leads. Of course, narrative has power beyond financial returns; they contribute heavily to biases in policies, procedures, norms, and practices that permeate the work that community development does every day.

## IT'S TIME TO PRIORITIZE BEING THE AUTHORS OF OUR OWN STORIES.

In this issue, we pull out the collective typewriter and start writing something new. ThirdSpace invites you to review our [Storyed Communities, Community Stories](#) report (created in partnership with the [Community Opportunity Alliance](#) and with funding support from [The Kresge Foundation](#)) and our partner [Storytellers for Change's](#) [Crafting Anti-Racist Narratives for Community Development](#) toolkit. Then delve into how folks are thinking about dominant narratives and stories and what it takes to resource our own more accurate depictions. Together, we can craft something beautiful by, for, and of the people ... but it takes practice. Onward.

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# ARTIST'S WORK: VÍCTOR MELÉNDEZ



*Víctor Meléndez is an Art Director, designer and illustrator based in Seattle, originally from Mexico. His work is a combination of bold lines, vivid colors, organic forms and mysterious, spellbinding characters. Melendez's multicultural upbringing gives him a unique approach to craft and style. This distinctive quality has given him the opportunity to create award-winning work for a wide variety of clients that include REI, Pepsi, Target, Starbucks, Crayola, SubPop, USPS, Hallmark, and Honda, amongst others.*





# PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE: A CALL FOR RADICAL REFLECTION, HEALING & CRITICAL HOPE

LUIS ORTEGA

**STORYTELLING IS HOW WE  
CONSTRUCT MEANING,  
COMMUNICATE OUR VALUES,  
AND SHAPE THE FRAMES WE USE TO INTERPRET THE WORLD.  
WE USE STORIES, WHICH REPEATED OVER TIME BECOME NARRATIVES,  
TO COMMUNICATE AND SOCIALIZE WHAT PEOPLE LIKE “US” ARE SUPPOSED TO DO.**

These narratives have been shaped across generations by power dynamics determining who gets to make decisions, whose voices are heard, and who has access to resources. In the community development sector, these dominant narratives—widely accepted stories that legitimize and reinforce existing power structures and marginalize communities of color—shape policies, funding decisions, and resource allocation. Toward An Anti-Racist Paradigm in Community Development: High-Level Research Findings identified eleven such narratives.

Acknowledging these narratives, while essential, is only part of an initial step. An intentional effort to advance anti-racist practices will go beyond naming harmful stories and actively counter them by creating opportunities to imagine and amplify stories that embody a much-needed shift in community development.

Consider what stories can move us from a scarcity to an abundance mindset or from a colorblind to an explicitly anti-racist approach. Imagine stories to reinforce the importance of decision-making processes that are of, by, and for residents. Amplify stories to reaffirm communities' cultural wealth, facilitate healing, and uplift community-led journalism and storytelling traditions.

To support community development practitioners in this work, we developed the Crafting Anti-Racist Narratives for Community Development Toolkit.

## **NARRATIVE CHANGE IS POSSIBLE**

In the tradition of my ancestors, I approach my practice as a narrative strategist to embody the Nahuatl precept of In Xochitl, In Cuicatl (The Flower, The Song). As a storyteller, I seek to co-imagine, craft, and share stories to manifest flowers and songs of joy, healing, liberation, and nourishment within my community.

I'm called to this work because, as a child, I learned our well-being is directly connected to the stories surrounding our lives. The stories my grandmothers and mom told me were always nourishing. They made me feel seen, heard, valued, and loved. As I grew up, however, I encountered other stories.

I learned about colorism, what it feels like to be labeled “illegal,” and how my resilience can be weaponized against me. These stories dehumanized me. For many years, they shifted how I viewed myself and engaged with others. Recovering myself required a deep commitment to engage in storytelling as a practice of freedom, radical reflection, healing, and critical hope. This personal journey is the reason why I believe narrative change is possible.

If stories can be told to separate and harm us, then stories can also be told to heal and reaffirm the connections we share. As you embark on narrative change work, I invite you to consider some of the lessons I've learned along my journey.

## ONGOING RADICAL REFLECTION

The word “radical” comes from the Latin word “radix,” which means “root.” Crafting a narrative strategy requires us to go to the root of our stories. We need to reflect on the message we broadcast outward and the personal stories we carry within. To change dominant narratives, we first must understand their essence and discern our roles within them. Furthermore, as individuals, when we embark on this introspective journey, diving deep into our beliefs and biases, we wield a potent tool for change. By reflecting on and transforming the narratives we harbor within ourselves, we can demonstrate narrative change is possible.

## COMMIT TO COLLECTIVE HEALING

As we reckon with the legacy and unfolding harmful impact of dominant narratives, our narrative strategies need to be guided by a commitment to collective healing. Do we merely aim to tell stories about justice, or do we strive to ensure that the very process through which we craft and share narratives is itself just and healing? No matter how well-intentioned, narrative change efforts without a healing-centered engagement framework risk perpetuating harm. Instead, our narrative projects can honor and uplift the healing knowledge, practices, and traditions that BIPOC communities have sustained across generations.

**“TO CHANGE  
DOMINANT  
NARRATIVES,  
WE FIRST MUST  
UNDERSTAND THEIR  
ESSENCE AND  
DISCERN OUR ROLES  
WITHIN THEM.”**

## EMBODY CRITICAL HOPE

Lastly, as we examine and seek to counter dominant narratives, our storytelling has to embody what educator Jeff Duncan-Andrade refers to as critical hope – the combined capacity to acknowledge and engage with the pain and struggles in our communities, as well as the precious sources of joy, possibility, and hope inherent within each of us. Without criticality, our narrative change efforts can become race-neutral and sound like naive optimism. Without hope, our storytelling becomes deficit-based and detached from social justice movements' legacy and unfolding work. In other words, we need to be critical of the systemic sources of racism and uplift our collective agency to build a just world.

As you engage in your narrative work, I wish you healing, joy, and transformation. May the stories we co-create acknowledge our past, nourish our present, and pave the way for a just future.

*Luis Ortega is founder and director of [Storytellers for Change](#). He is a multidisciplinary storyteller, facilitator, educator, and artist. Over the last fourteen years, Luis has worked with cross-sector organizations to co-design storytelling strategies and leadership programs to foster empathy, inclusion, and equity across communities.*

*The author is responding to the findings shared in the Anti-Racist Community Development Research Project, produced with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to increase understanding of structural racism in community development and pathways to racially equitable outcomes that promote health equity. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of RWJF or ThirdSpace Action Lab.*

# PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE: WHEN RESIDENTS ARE THE AUTHORS OF THEIR OWN STORY

SETH BEATTIE

You don't have to look too far to find a technical story about community development. We tend to focus on the development part. We produce housing. We process applications. We provide technical assistance. Piece by piece, we're building infrastructure to support residents.

But those technical stories are missing something. Community development is emotional. It's messy. It's the family whose possessions are on the curb in an eviction. It's the person who's renovating a house getting called to know that someone's broken in and stripped out copper wiring. It's the family reeling from a shooting. It's the first-time homebuyer the day they sign the deed. It's people building community in the block club meeting. It's the resident-led initiative to document determinants of health.

Just below the technical production and financing are the stories of people ... the community part. The built environment helps define what a neighborhood is, but even more powerful is how residents animate that environment. Communities are places of history and culture, struggle and triumph. But as a sector, community development often fails to foreground that very human element – or to engage residents in telling that story themselves.

Over the past year, ThirdSpace has gotten the rare opportunity to unpack these stories with residents. Led by my colleague Dominique Miller and supported by the Community Opportunity Alliance, The Kresge Foundation, a team of literary artists, and a group of community development organizations, we've explored what residents think of community development today and where they'd like to see it in the future. In storied places like Brownsville, Dearborn, Memphis, and Richmond, what they shared taps into the legacy of early community development, when the Civil Rights and Black Power movements helped usher in a new approach to building community power.

The fuller research includes a lot of different insights, ones that can be useful in engaging in your own dialogue around resident voice, but there were definitely some key takeaways.

## DO PEOPLE KNOW THE STORY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT? IT DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ASK.

In setting up the research, we tried to be intentional in our collaboration with ACCESS, the Arab American National Museum, bcWORKSHOP, the Center for Transforming Communities, and Richmond LAND; we wanted to reach residents who were really engaged in local community development work, as well as residents who were less engaged. That distinction ended up pretty clear in interviews. Some poured a substantial amount of time and energy into community development work, while others weren't familiar with local community development at all – or even what it focuses on. The good news is that when local efforts were described, residents across the board saw community development as incredibly important and were overwhelmingly interested in engaging at a deeper level. The bad news is that residents generally did not feel like systems are currently set up to allow for that deeper work.



## THE STORY IS ABOUT ADDRESSING SYMPTOMS, BUT A FULLER STORY WOULD TACKLE CAUSES

Residents were very supportive of the kinds of direct service community development advances – things like job placement, housing production, and public amenity improvements. They also had an appetite to collaborate on upstream interventions – particularly narrative and policy work – that they believe could have more direct impact on root causes of grassroots challenges and barriers, particularly in communities of color. As the field has gotten more hyper-professionalized, it's become all too easy to dismiss residents as lacking the “competencies” needed to participate directly. Our interviews suggested that's an outright falsity; residents came with a sophisticated understanding of policy (particularly around how funding is distributed in local ecosystems) and narrative. This suggests that community development organizations could find natural collaborators and champions through substantial resident engagement – but only if financial support to organizations and residents allow for this kind of deeper partnership.

**“COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS COULD FIND NATURAL COLLABORATORS AND CHAMPIONS THROUGH SUBSTANTIAL RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT – BUT ONLY IF FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO ORGANIZATIONS AND RESIDENTS ALLOW FOR THIS KIND OF DEEPER PARTNERSHIP.”**

## THE STORY IS ABOUT MONEY, BUT IS THAT MONEY HITTING THE GROUND?

Residents made a pretty clear case that knocking down barriers to participation (location, time, and structure of meetings; unpacking jargon; and especially, financially resourcing resident leadership) could result in much more equitable and effective community development. Resident supports could elevate lived experience that would make services work better, expand perspectives that would allow for more nuanced understanding of community priorities and solutions, and create a critical mass of participants that could move the needle on community development policy.

Across the board, it was clear that residents were more than willing to step up to move their communities in a more equitable direction. They were prepared for it, passionate about it, and felt an urgency about it. The real question is whether the sector is also prepared, passionate, and feeling that urgency.

*Seth Beattie is Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives at [ThirdSpace Action Lab](#), where he focuses on community development learning and strategy. Prior to joining ThirdSpace, he served as senior program officer with The Kresge Foundation's Arts & Culture Program, working to advance arts and culture's role in equitable development. Seth has a bachelor's of arts from Franklin College and a Master's of Public Administration from Cleveland State University. Failing to act will amount to complicity. This moment doesn't require us to be neutral; it requires more people to stay woke and name the politics of hate and division that prevent us from doing our work with intention.*

**it will happen on the blink of a blind eye  
at the tip toed speech of an orphaned city**

when the manna cascades at the mouth of a food desert  
washing over it's thirst 'nd ash like spring falls of honeydew

**beckoning bones of street corners to arise  
from its drunken graves**

un-withering its heart from the searing of redlined fires  
kneeling at the soothing oil 'nd promise of it's skin

**to shine back lively again from a forgotten name.**

how blessed will be the whispers of leaves  
that confesses the blood of the vine

**in the offshoot of its roots?**

as the crown of the coil head 'nd bronze footed seeds  
be watered in the cocaine valleys of section 8

**be sweet flicker to flame**

that chews through shadows of debt  
where jim crows boots be food for the fire 'nd brimstone

**after ghettos become 3rd day revivals**

coughing up vouchers 'nd rusted padlocks  
shedding black gates from it's memory

**i imagine the crooked smile of city streets  
be renewed, wide toothed grinning**

like hot boys passing a texas sun by way of bayou

**when our sidewalks beam like a mouth full of gold teeth  
'nd our eyes are no longer rosewood or a red summer**

i'd say glory be the day at the fingertips of the sky

**who's untied the noose from our ankles  
'nd loosened the breath of our upside down pockets**

when the raspy soul of the trap house be wings to the wind  
set free to hear its home born name in its native tongue

**may no front yard be left behind. may patio porch steps  
be a gathering of new shoes 'nd bbq blues**

where copper colored fingers hold flowers to its face like a mirror

**wearing vanilla scent under mango coated laughter**

swaying rooftops as an open mic of funkadelic haikus  
leaning forward at dusk to hear it's fabric of sunset secrets

**for only these new moons won't ever see a bullet  
or snort the chemtrails of gunpowder**

won't ever witness the asphalt shiver

**or swallow a salty cry again**

night will be a friendly shoulder for the dreams to sink into

**bringing dawn it's daily bread where each prayer  
deserves to be a full bellied sermon**

swinging at the ears of summer tuesdays testifying  
of fresh paint on acres of garden bed rows like church pews

**when whole foods 'nd sweet teas will be the gospel of us  
'nd park slides will giggle with truth**

i want to be a front wheel wheelie  
down the soul train line of our highways

**rocking shea buttered locs crossfit crowned  
like a helmet. yea, here safety will be the air we breathe**

our jordan river journal we dip our sorrows  
baptising our hood anthologies into a Black Sabbath

*Donté Clark is a poet, actor, and community activist from unincorporated North Richmond, California who works with youth organizations throughout the Richmond area. He served as one of five artist researcher partners in ThirdSpace's Storied Communities, Community Stories project. Donté previously served as poet laureate of Richmond and appeared in Romeo Is Bleeding, Kicks, Code Switch, and The North Pole.*

# PLACES LIKE THIS: FARGO

DOMINIQUE MILLER

*“Community development practitioners are tired. This is one of the most frequent things we heard in interviews. Poorly compensated, overworked, heavily regulated, doing emotionally exhausting work in building consensus, across multiple constituencies, over multiple bodies of work.”*

- Anti-Racist Community Development High-Level Findings

Over the past year, I've interviewed dozens of community development practitioners about how structural racism shows up in the field and what anti-racist practices look like. As I reflected on how often practitioners spoke of inadequate funding in communities of color and of the impactful work being done in these same communities, I began thinking about how there seems to be an expectation for these communities to do more with less. The Indigenous Association is no exception.

In July 2023, I had the privilege and pleasure of spending time with the Indigenous Association and their partners in Fargo, and during my time I was reminded that...

**Places like this know their community best.** The Indigenous Association is composed of individuals spanning dozens of tribal nations with expertise in many industries, including social work, criminal justice, public health and medicine, policy, arts and culture, organizing, and entrepreneurship. Rather than provide direct services that are beyond the expertise of the staff or duplicate the work of partners, they maximize the expertise of their network to connect the community with the resources they need to have the chance to live a healthy life and build strong communities. There is also a cultural and regional expertise allowing the organization to serve as a resource for those in the urban area of Fargo, as well as those on rural and tribal lands, often commuting between the two. They are making space and opportunity for Native American-led and -serving individuals and organizations to share information and resources with the community, reigniting the power the community already holds and enabling them to decide what programs are needed, for them to host their own programs, for them to have a place to restore and engage in cultural activities.

**Places like this are often underestimated.** The Community Opportunity Alliance defines community development as “a process through which community stakeholders come together to vision, plan, and implement a more prosperous future”; I'd say the Indigenous Association fits that bill. So much about anti-racist community development work is about creating a space for holistic, culturally relevant community-led efforts, even more than outputs like number of units built. Programming and events are directly informed by stakeholders and directly reflect community needs, including the Indigenous Business Association meetings, a Community Connection Circle, and a Nutrition and Breastfeeding Support Workshop for parents. The work done locally over the past 20 years is coming to fruition, and seeds planted are now blossoming into new opportunities and hope. In the Anti-Racist Community Development research, it was noted that housing development is overrepresented in the sector, which results in less attention and resources given to community-serving organizations who are not real estate developers. Not being directly engaged in real estate, small business development, or a provider of direct services may cause some not to view the Indigenous Association as a community development organization at all. I would strongly disagree with this assessment and believe it's precisely organizations like this that should be resourced because their processes are most responsive to community needs and are central to advancing equitable, community-led practices.



**Places like this are collaborative.** The Indigenous Association has close ties with the Native American Commission (NAC). It was a privilege to be able to attend the final NAC meeting of Sharon White Bear. After having co-founded the NAC 20 years ago, the first of its kind in the United States, she stepped down, making room for new generations to fill that space. The commission has brought culturally relevant practices into their formal City processes, while providing a space for Native American-specific issues to be discussed and addressed monthly. This group is made up primarily of women from a range of tribal nations and professions, with a strong representation in medicine and healthcare. I was able to meet with NAC member Dr. Emily Sargeant PhD, LP (White Earth Nation) who shared about her impactful work as a Clinical Psychologist to provide culturally relevant care and engage in research that is moving her field in a more equitable direction. Though she is doing more with less – less support, less internal collaboration given the lack of colleagues with similar lived experience, and less resources available to devise ways to help her community, seeing the positive impact on patients and her field make the challenges worth it.

The Indigenous Association also has a close relationship with Nicole Crutchfield and Tia Braseth (among others within the City Planning department) and with the Downtown Engagement Center (DEC). DEC serves the unhoused population and offers much more than homeless supportive services. Their model involves a comprehensive approach to the needs of the population, as well as culturally relevant offerings, given that over 40% of the unhoused population that utilizes the DEC services is Native American. It was clear that exposure to and the ability to participate in one's own culture has a positive impact on participant health, engagement, and outcomes. There are medical services onsite, a space for Native American cultural services and activities, laundry, access to clean clothes, and much more.

**Places like this need to be resourced.** Community-based organizations of color often have more impact in their communities and put forth more effort than their white counterparts yet receive less funding. This is especially true of Native American communities who receive less than 0.4% of funding from major philanthropic institutions. Communities of color deal similarly with the fallout of harmful narratives like the Bootstrap and Public Dysfunction Narrative and Trickle-Down Narrative. This is especially true among Black and Native American communities. We're told to get over genocide (physical and cultural), forced relocation, enslavement, and the Jim Crow era because they have no bearing on the state of communities today. Structural inequities are explained away as of our own making from our unwillingness to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and further assimilate into American (i.e. white dominant) culture. However, after talking with many community development practitioners of color (not to mention my own experiences in the field), it is clear that we're pulling but finding that the strap is too short, non-existent, or that we don't even have a boot to begin with.

Meanwhile, the trickle-down narrative continues to result in place-based organizations struggling to obtain resources and competing with other organizations of color for the same funding. What if the bootstrap narrative was replaced with the narrative of resourcing the tradition of resiliency and resourcefulness? Or if the trickle-down narrative became the natural flow narrative, where resources are not just bidirectional, but cyclical with the top drawing from the bottom as the bottom also draws directly from the top. Our Anti-Racist Community Development research shows that practitioners believe that resourcing models and practices of place-based organizations, like the Indigenous Association, is critical for advancing equitable practices at the national scale. Thus, there is mutual benefit to supporting place-based work; it is not simply top-down.

**“STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES ARE EXPLAINED AWAY AS OF OUR OWN MAKING FROM OUR UNWILLINGNES TO PULL OURSELVES UP BY OUR BOOTSTRAPS AND FURTHER ASSIMILATE IN AMERICAN (I.E. WHITE DOMINANT) CULTURE ... IT IS CLEAR THAT WE’RE PULLING BUT FINDING THAT THE STRAP IS TOO SHORT, NON-EXISTENT, OR THAT WE DON’T EVEN HAVE A BOOT TO BEGIN WITH.”**

Also, let's be real, there is more than enough money floating around this country for everyone, but the illusion of scarcity is profitable. Financial resources, coming in on a regular and reliable basis, are helpful, but so are reparative frameworks rooted in history, acknowledgement of past and present harm, and acknowledgement of the importance and success of culturally relevant solutions developed by and for the community. It was clear that while community members are interested in support, they are not interested in outsiders parachuting in to dictate the problem and implement a detached solution.

The Indigenous Association and their partners shared an apt analysis of issues facing the community, root causes, a desire to be preventative and not reactive, knowledge and commitment to community-led approaches and strategies, and a serious lack of access to resources. They know the problems. They also have the ability to develop, test, and implement solutions and must be allowed to try, fail, rebuild, and continue trying without being penalized for it.

**Places like this are reparative, restorative, and resilient.** Organizations like the Indigenous Association will always exist because community members will always do what is needed to strive to strengthen their communities, whether properly resourced or not. While spending time with staff and board members, I heard people devoted to continuing a long history of personal sacrifice to secure a better future for current and future generations. I heard the weariness of knowing that “If I don't do this, no one else will”, so people continue through the burnout, intergenerational trauma, constant injustice, negative stereotypes, and simply trying to live. This is holistic burnout, and in order to advance an anti-racist community development paradigm, all aspects of this burnout must be acknowledged and addressed. Though there is stress in this work, there is also unmeasurable joy and a sense of accomplishment that comes with devoting oneself to such meaningful work. It was clear that everyone takes much pride in their culture, their community, and their traditions. This joy serves as a foundation for self-care and also informs programming to promote asset-based frameworks and approaches to community work. I had the privilege of attending the weekly craft and regalia-making night (twice!) and found it to be a restorative environment. Having a safe space to engage in community dialogue, delve into, revisit, or reengage cultural practices appeared to be crucial and healing for attendees. Self-care is difficult to find time to practice, so built-in events like this with food, fellowship, and fun allow for individuals to organically restore to be able to jump back into the work the next day. The Indigenous Association is a critical component of the health and wellness of the community. Their presence serves as a reparative effort to strengthen community and advance anti-racist community development practices. Places like this must always exist.

Special thanks to Brandon Baity, Nicole Crutchfield, Tanya Redroad, Tracey Wilkie, Joe Williams (featured on this site!), Carissa Brownotter, Catlyn Christie, Maegin Elshaug, Tia Braseth, Chandler Esslinger, and Jan Eliassen. I understand what it means to be invited into a community as an outsider, how easy it can be to enter a space unintentionally extractive or with assumptions. It's my hope that this new relationship yields as much fruit for them as it has for me, ThirdSpace, and for racially equitable community development work. Onward.

*Dominique Miller is Director of Consulting Strategy at [ThirdSpace Action Lab](#). Prior to joining ThirdSpace, she was the Director of Community Education at the Institute of Art and Design at New England College. She was also the Creative Strategies Producer at Little Tokyo Service Center, and played an integral role in developing “[+LAB](#)”, an initiative integrating arts and creativity into community development work and managed [+LAB](#) projects including [Takachizu](#) and the [+LAB Artist Residency program](#).*

*The author is responding to on-the-ground observations and to the findings shared in the Anti-Racist Community Development Research Project, produced with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to increase understanding of structural racism in community development and pathways to racially equitable outcomes that promote health equity. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of RWJF or ThirdSpace Action Lab.*

# A CULTURE OF DRAWING CONNECTIONS

## IN(TER)VIEW WITH MAYA SANTOS



We spent time with Maya Santos to talk through equitable grantmaking, the role of cultural facilities in building community, and the ways that intersectional, intergenerational approaches can unlock new ways of thinking.

*To start, can you share a little bit about your work in community development?*

Maya: I manage a grant program at 4Culture, which is a Cultural Development Authority, and public agency of King County, Washington. We fund arts-, culture-, heritage-, and preservation-based projects which include a full range, from individual artists and public art to landmark preservation and cultural facilities. My grant program is called Building for Equity. It's all about helping organizations renovate, develop, purchase, and sustain their cultural space while prioritizing historically underserved communities. I also worked for the Seattle Chinatown International District Preservation and Development Authority, on affordable housing and mixed-use tenant improvement. Previously I worked on launching +LAB, an initiative focused on integrating creative strategies in community development work for Little Tokyo Service Center, as part of their ArtPlace America grant. This resulted in ongoing creative place-keeping projects and intergenerational community engagement strategies for the CDC's work in Historic Little Tokyo Los Angeles.

*Cultural institutions are so vital to a community. Our research has clearly demonstrated that a great deal of community development practice is shaped by culture. I'm wondering how you're thinking about that link between equitable development building up culture and culture building up equitable development?*

Maya: We have an Equity in Development and Construction Assessment which is a required part of our Cultural Facilities Grant application. While we are assessing internal and external racial equity centered practices, goals, and plans for organizations we are also searching for effective tools and practices informed by culture. How are they engaging their community through the development of their project? How are they seeking Minority Business Enterprises or BIPOC-owned service contractors? How are they partnering and collaborating with groups outside of the communities they serve to expand their programs? Effective approaches that organizations take through a cultural facility project are of interest to us so we can share what works with others. There's a lot of groundwork being laid right now through other equity-focused grant funding resources in King County. It's starting to get very real in terms of how to translate the cultural value of racial equity in development to broad groups of stakeholders – council members, private funders, or even applicants.

For example, strategic partnerships are one of the tools that Building for Equity utilizes to address racial inequities in space. Cultural Facilities Grantees receiving a significant amount of funds are required to provide a unique public benefit which we call a "Cultural Space Contribution" to a BIPOC-led/serving organization. This is a 3-year partnership where the grantee provides free cultural space-use and/or technical support to a partner BIPOC-led/serving organization. The main goal of this partnership is that the grantee is supporting the economic viability of the BIPOC-led/serving partner organization. Together, they are also to collaborate toward a measured racially equitable goal while the grantee's staff and leadership receive anti-racist training that includes exploring a new tool or practice for their organization. This is an example of how equitable development practices also build up culture. What becomes of these partnerships within this framework of shared resources and collaboration ultimately benefits us all culturally speaking.

The challenge is how to translate how important equitable development work is. 4Culture and Building for Equity as a program is lucky to have the funding to explore different ways to get to racially equitable outcomes. For instance, there's a lot of work to better serve Native and Indigenous communities and incorporate those communities in planning and development of programs or large projects throughout the city. 4Culture is putting work into intentionally understanding our role in that effort by putting meaning and action beyond our Land Acknowledgement. Building for Equity is developing a Native-led Cultural Facilities pilot program, a platform where a Native-led body will be making recommendations on which Native-led Cultural Facility project to fund in King County on an annual basis. This is an exciting development for 4Culture in terms of how this program can support the rematriation of land, and environmental conservation as it intersects with heritage, culture, arts, and preservation for Native communities.

*It's incredibly important to provide dollars towards arts and culture, and think about intersections with things like facilities and land sovereignty. It's wonderful that you all are taking a step towards that and having it led by a Native body of people who get to then make recommendations for it. I'm wondering if, as you're doing that kind of intersectional grantmaking or reflecting on your own work as an artistic person, you're observing ways that arts and culture are being employed to keep whole communities together.*

Maya: I guess I have a unique role of being able to work with a variety of types of organizations doing a wide spectrum of community work. Cultural infrastructure is how these organizations survive, at least in terms of having space to do the work they're doing. For example, conservation-based history, centered in the Land Back movement and in traditional practices of Indigenous and Native peoples, helps us reinterpret our history to see places differently – like learning that our national parks were militarized mechanisms for the dispossession of Native lands. These kinds of critical conversations are helping piece things together, and decolonize the ways we've been taught, the ways I've been taught. Through building relationships with the people and places actually doing the work, my work to support them is informed. On top of that, it's truly an amazing feeling to help put funds toward their work! I'm honored to be listening and to be part of those conversations. I get to see how the different sectors can, and do, work together to support a decolonized cultural infrastructure that benefits the whole.

*Is there anything you think we should be collectively paying attention to in trying to put forward these intersectional approaches?*

Maya: It's important to have continued intergenerational dialogue around racial justice, racial equity, and anti-racism. It's easy to have disconnections between work done in the past and work being done now. This work is living and never gets done and I'm grateful to have elders in my Advisory Committee to lean on and have challenging conversations with. They've been in this work way longer than me and have such clarity, wisdom, and passion. They have a keen sense of what things should really look like, and what it takes to see something work. It's a relationship I want to make stronger in the work that I'm charged with – to make sure the work is informed by the continuum of culture, and not a vacuum. I think it's easy to talk about inclusivity but what does that really mean if you're not thinking about what perspectives are missing and to whom does this work even matter? We should always be ready to learn, we should always stay open to improving the work and to drawing new connections.

*Maya Santos serves as Program Manager at 4Culture, where she oversees the Building for Equity grant program. Maya is also an architectural designer, and documentary filmmaker specializing in place-based stories.*

*The interviewee is responding to the findings shared in the Anti-Racist Community Development Research Project, produced with support from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to increase understanding of structural racism in community development and pathways to racially equitable outcomes that promote health equity. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of RWJF or ThirdSpace Action Lab.*



The stories we tell ourselves in community development matter a whole lot to what we do and how we do it. Interviewees in our anti-racist community development research identified eleven dominant community development narratives and offered recommendations for doing narrative change work in the sector.

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

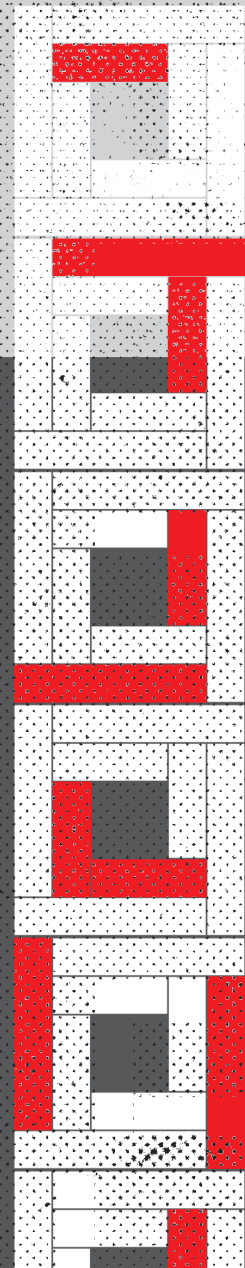
## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: RISK AND RISK AVERSION.

Investments in leaders of color and communities of color are inherently risky, while investments in white leaders and white-majority communities (and/or gentrifying communities) are less risky.

Funding innovative work is inherently risky, and we should focus on funding work that is already proven.

Averting risk is an important (and even driving) feature of long-term community development funding.

When presented with a choice between two clearly different risk levels, a community development funder should choose the less risky, even if the “riskier” investment offers more potential for long-term social impact.





# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: TRICKLE-DOWN.

If functioning properly, markets will eventually address inequities, including among the most marginalized residents and organizations in our communities.

Responses need to be regional or statewide in order to make substantive change.

National organizations are better equipped to build field infrastructure than local organizations.

It is important to standardize best community development practices across the entire field, rather than allowing for variation or centering local context in approach.

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE:

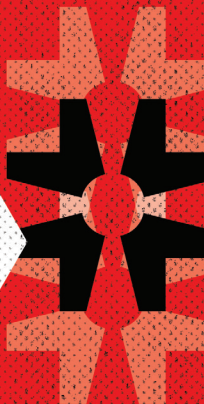
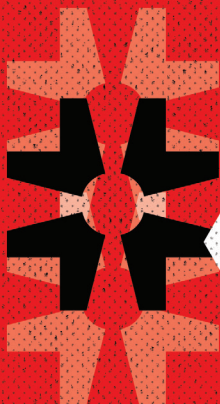
## BOOTSTRAP AND PUBLIC DYSFUNCTION

Public benefit recipients will take advantage of the system if they're not incentivized to improve their own situation.

People who are poor should be satisfied with whatever they get, even if that means cheap, substandard, and toxic housing.

Public housing has been a universal failure; it's a money trap and doesn't warrant investment.

Public investments in failing schools, distressed public spaces, and poorly attended arts and sports programs aren't prudent uses of public funds.





The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: SANCTITY OF SCALE.

Resident solutions might work well in a small geography, but they're not easily scalable.

The affordable housing crisis is so urgent that the sector really needs to focus on production of units over community planning or power-building work.

The level of economic need in communities of color means we need to bring in whatever kind of development that we can (without attention to what kinds of businesses and jobs residents are actually seeking).

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: INCREMENTAL CHANGE.

If community demands are too great or we push too hard, we'll scare people away from longer-term coalition work.

If we call out the bad behaviors of major community development players and private market players too directly, they might not invest here over the long haul.

Community members need to recognize that work can't happen that quickly.

The numbers suggest there isn't displacement pressure here now, so we don't need to think about anti-displacement strategy yet.



# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: UNIVERSAL OPPORTUNITY.

Race-neutral community development approaches can do a lot of good and with a lot less friction.

We should be less concerned about being race-explicit and more about ensuring that there's equal opportunity for all (without an acknowledgment of how systemic inequity has manifested and continues to manifest in access to opportunity).

If people are given equal opportunity, over time, that will be enough to address disparities in outcomes by race.



# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

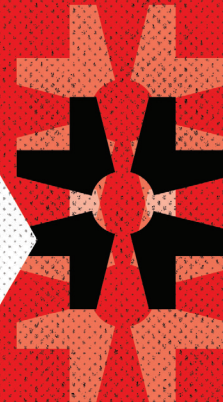
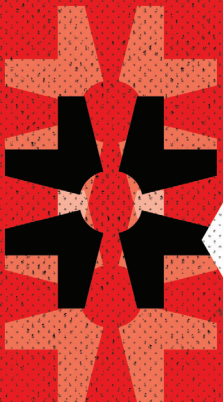
## THE WRONG NARRATIVE:

### BLANK SLATES

The level of disinvestment in communities of color make them ideal places to test new ideas (with an attention to outside visionaries).

Communities of color tend to have a lack of assets (without attention to assets that aren't valued by markets or resources extracted from communities).

The largest institutions in communities of color are the ones that we should really build our strategies around and leverage, even if they are disproportionately white, affluent institutions, and even if this means less investment or attention for smaller anchors developed by people of color.





The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: PROBLEMATIZING RESIDENTS, NOT SYSTEMS.

Community members lack the technical capacities to do community development work.

Community members don't seem well-prepared to go through basic government processes.

If we want to seriously address community safety, we have to start by acknowledging Black-on-Black crime.

A big part of the problem with distressed properties is residents not paying attention to upkeep or paying their bills.

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: EQUATING DIRECT SERVICE AND SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE.

Community Development Financial Institutions are the modern evolution of community development.

Community Development Corporations are too geographically limited to do the real work of community development.

Economic development can accomplish everything that community development does but at a greater geographic scale.



# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

## THE WRONG NARRATIVE: MAGIC LEADERSHIP.

If we can get more community practitioners of color in positions of leadership, that by itself should solve a lot of the structural inequities in the system.

Leaders of color are well-situated to support the learning and racial equity journeys of white staff, board members, and community members.

Leaders of color can thrive in pushing reform in community development, even without a lot of professional or financial supports or broader attention to structural racism.

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

The stories we routinely tell ourselves in community development cause real harm to people of color and prevent us from embracing promising practices.

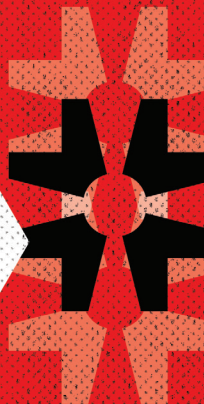
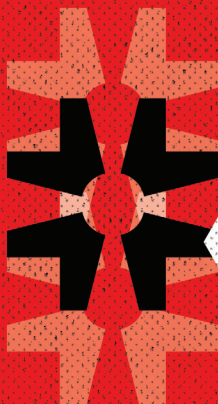
## THE WRONG NARRATIVE:

## PROTOTYPICAL COMMUNITIES

The community development sector is focused almost exclusively on Black and brown communities of low incomes in larger cities, and the vast majority of funding already goes to these communities.

Supporting the movement of residents of color into predominantly white communities, particularly suburbs, should by itself solve a lot of structural inequities.

Community development either doesn't exist or doesn't work in rural or suburban. Indigenous communities are too sparse for community development infrastructure and are supported anyway through federal treaties.







# RIGHT THE WRONG.

There are no quick-fix, silver bullet solutions when it comes to dismantling entrenched, harmful narratives. But our **Anti-Racist Community Development** interviewees lifted up a number of potentially promising approaches.

Start by acknowledging and addressing dominant narratives internal to community development *organizations*, such as emphasizing sustainability and talent retention over community service and internal to *communities*, such as residents discounting a still vibrant Black culture despite demographic changes.

Make sure your narrative work is built around local traditions, history, and cultural practices, in order to make it more relevant and accessible.

Invest in popular education and individual coaching to reduce resident barriers to actively participate in narrative work.

# RIGHT THE WRONG.

**There are no quick-fix, silver bullet solutions when it comes to dismantling entrenched, harmful narratives. But our Anti-Racist Community Development interviewees lifted up a number of potentially promising approaches.**

Have an explicit strategy for how to address implicit narratives — where people say one thing but act out another — particularly when there are power dynamics involved, such as challenging an implicit narrative of an employer or elected official.

Ensure that your narrative work is being controlled by people who have directly experienced poverty and structural racism, and recognize, value, and resource lived experience as a critical contributor to narrative expertise.

Recognize that even strong, equity-centered narrative change work can be misappropriated or misconstrued, and actively plan to address such situations.



# CONSTELLATIONS OF HOPE

IXCHEL TONANTZIN XOCHITLZIHUATL

Space-place activation  
Time/ line configurations

**To gather: food (resource community. nourish souls. connect hearts.)**

Plants  
As portals

Water  
As memory

Elder wisdom  
within our bodies

Stories that soar  
beyond borders

Rainbows and resacas  
Illuminating  
Refracting  
Remembering  
Re-  
Member-  
Ing

(A gerund)  
The light, the water, the sand  
In motion

The space  
Of our bodies

**The space between our bodies**

Our bodies like stars  
Constellations of hope  
Singing our way  
To the homes in our heart

**Home is here  
We are home**

*Ixchel Tonantzin Xochitlzihuatl is a visual, community, and conceptual artist who works to evolve the collective imagination towards more peaceful, just and liberatory present/ futures. She served as one of five artist researcher partners in ThirdSpace's Storied Communities, Community Stories project. Xochitlzihuatl has ancestral roots connecting her to the Rio Grande Valley and moved to the region for a fellowship with buildingcommunityWORKSHOP in 2016; after the fellowship ended, she has continued to work with the community in the Rio Grande Valley to this day.*



# PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE: RECONSTRUCTING THE FOUNDATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

FRANK LEE

Atlanta, Georgia. The cradle of the Civil Rights Movement. When I tell fellow community development practitioners from other parts of the country that I've started my own community development corporation in the suburbs of Atlanta, there's an assumption that the history and culture of the Civil Rights Movement have paved the way for equitable community development in BIPOC neighborhoods. People often find it hard to believe when I start to explain the complete absence of infrastructure to support community-driven development in the suburbs that have quickly become the embodiment of diversity in America.

Culture is powerful. Culture is one of the pillars of our work, but it's also one of the most challenging obstacles to overcome both professionally and personally. As a second generation Korean American, I straddle two (often more) cultures to navigate a society that is frustratingly binary in structure. There are times when I actively resist conforming to cultural norms, but find my efforts futile because culture is powerful. Culture is what connects us. Culture is "our people". Culture is home.

What does this mean as we try to shift the paradigm towards anti-racist community development?

The research findings show that "scant investment and resources devoted to suburban community development... has important racial equity implications, as suburbs increasingly attract more residents of color without grappling with their histories as places of intentional and explicit racial exclusion." Although it looks like a single-family house with a white picket fence, the premier destination of last generation's white flight is built on exclusionary foundations that are more insidious in nature and will only strengthen over time without a paradigm shift in community development. How will BIPOC and immigrant communities adapt the time-tested approach of place-based community development in a place where some of the foundational pillars just don't exist?

Where there are less ties between people, place, culture, and history.

Where our histories are shorter and less collective.

Where it's more culturally integrated, physically.

Where it's more socially segregated, racially and ethnically.

**"ALTHOUGH IT LOOKS LIKE A SINGLE-FAMILY HOUSE WITH A WHITE PICKET FENCE, THE PREMIER DESTINATION OF LAST GENERATION'S WHITE FLIGHT IS BUILT ON EXCLUSIONARY FOUNDATIONS THAT ARE MORE INSIDIOUS IN NATURE AND WILL ONLY STRENGTHEN OVER TIME WITHOUT A PARADIGM SHIFT IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT."**

**“WHERE AGING IN PLACE CAN QUICKLY TURN INTO SOCIAL ISOLATION. WHERE UPWARD MOBILITY IS JUST AN INTERSTATE EXIT AWAY. WHERE AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS CALLED EXTENDED FAMILY.”**

Where the individualistic structure disrupts community building.

Where aging in place can quickly turn into social isolation.

Where upward mobility is just an interstate exit away.

Where affordable housing is called extended family.

Where transit... what transit?

Where everybody speaks a different language, but the documents don't.

Where the people have changed, but the culture remains.

If reading this overwhelmed or discouraged you, you missed the point. This was written to remind us that the movement that inspired Asian American organizing that have fought to shape our own communities in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York surely has the power to inspire the next generation only a couple of exits north on I-85.

*Frank Lee is the founder and Executive Director of [85 Community Development Corporation](#), a community development organization serving diverse communities in the northeast suburbs of Metro Atlanta through culturally specific services and community-driven development. His previous experiences include operating culturally specific transit service for refugee and immigrant communities, serving as a planner for various municipalities in Georgia, and supporting community planning efforts in Little Tokyo and Koreatown in Los Angeles. Frank holds a Master's in Urban and Regional Planning from California State Polytechnic University and a Bachelor's in Urban Studies from the University of Pittsburgh.*

*The author is responding to the findings shared in the Anti-Racist Community Development Research Project, produced with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to increase understanding of structural racism in community development and pathways to racially equitable outcomes that promote health equity. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of RWJF or ThirdSpace Action Lab.*

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# A MEMPHIS LOVE LETTER

T.R. BROWN

## **LISTEN TO THE PIECE.**

Let us celebrate Memphis caretakers and waymakers –  
for the school backpacks they stack  
for the healthy greens and beans they pack.  
Hands harvesting for home-bound elders  
hot meals on Sunday and something sweet,  
(a pudding pack, perhaps) to savor  
come Monday morning.

**They give God's most majestic medicine.**

Amen to convenors and connectors  
translators and curators  
Alchemizing space and embittered boundaries  
Of class, culture, age and race.  
They know her blues ain't like his soul and that jazz man  
plays a chord nobody knows. Multilingual, they are  
transmuting word and deed, knowing tongues  
foreign and domestic are easy to misread

**Empowering a people to promise, purpose and  
let us not forget please the most meaningful  
of these – freedom, vision and peace.**

Let us laud the liquid leaders, flexible and invitational,  
not bound by proximity or antiquity.  
They hold open invitations for all to step in,  
move up and show out in nurturing ways.

**Let the groove be a pace of grace with  
full and replenishable cups so that we ensure  
that wellness, like leaders, abound and endure.**

Cheers to culture keepers who refuse  
to be a stranger – refuting with earnest  
and curious smiles the oddities  
we're taught to fear as danger.

**They make eye contact –  
say "hello" –  
ride bikes and skateboards,  
hold hope, and know that work and will  
turn blighted space into a nourishing place,  
with grocery stores aromatic with melon  
and sweet corn in a community  
where affordable homes are the abundant norm.**

Much praise to the historians, porch poets and painters  
who open their yards and kitchens as sacred.  
**Serve plates and palettes of redemption,  
where no one is regarded as disposable  
and everyone is a vessel of noble possibility.**

Let the resources reach the roots –  
where workers channel change,  
with or without nonprofits, platforms,  
titles and tip jars. **They are good trouble makers,  
policy shapers and meaning makers.**

Invest in them, incentivize, recognize,  
celebrate and elevate them  
that we all reach a higher ground.  
**Let the community be centered  
so that centers belong to the community  
and parking lots have no priority over people  
and Uptown police palaces, no privilege over playgrounds.**

Be still, for just a moment, and surely you feel  
a current too contemptuous for complacency.  
It is more powerful than a FedEx plane  
more resilient than a BNSF train.  
This is Memphis – South to North, Hollywood  
Orange Mound, Greenlaw, Prospect Park  
Frayser, Klondike-Smokey City, Douglass,  
Binghamton, and more.  
**Call and revere them by name –  
This is Memphis love.**

**About this piece** ... Everything referenced in this piece reflects the wisdom  
and insight of the thirteen individuals who graciously shared their stories  
and experiences about their communities. The conversations were  
captured as part of a collaborative project between ThirdSpace and the  
Community Opportunity Alliance. With Memphis identified as one of the  
four cities and the Center for Transforming Communities participating as  
the city's anchor organization, the project captured participants' views of  
community development. What was clear in every interview was the degree  
to which participants love Memphis, the work they do in community, and  
the people for whom they do it, often with little or no resources outside  
of what's in their own pockets. This is a humble tribute to those thirteen  
individuals, their powerful journeys and to their love of this heroic city. ~

**With gratitude, T. Brown**

*T.R. Brown is a Memphis-based literary artist. She served as one of five artist researcher partners in ThirdSpace's Storied Communities, Community Stories project. Brown has worked as a staff and board member, peer coach, and community profit within nonprofit, governmental, and educational sectors.*

# THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

## IN(TE)RVIEW WITH JOHAN MATTHEWS

We caught up with Johan Matthews to talk about the significance of homegrown institutions in community development work ... and the narratives that hold them back.

*What brought you to community development work? What keeps you motivated to keep doing it?*

**Johan:** I came into this work because I wanted my children to grow up in a better world. I was born and raised in Kingstown on an island nation now referred to as St. Vincent and the Grenadines. There, in the postcolonial context of my homeland, I was a naive native, shielded from the Black-White notions of racism that we find ourselves preoccupied with in the U.S.A. I came to the United States with my family in 2005. Even back then, I recognized that, as an immigrant, my family took an incredible leap of faith; that they left everything behind for the promise for a brighter future for their children. This path required assimilation, so I put on my blinders and marched onward. Gradually, though, as I progressed in my own life, I began to realize that there were invisible forces at work, negatively influencing the lives of people who looked like me and my own identity began to shift.

In fact, I became Black. Eventually, my journey of self-discovery and the identity shifts I experienced therein – from Indigenous to immigrant to Black – brought me to the realization that my identity had been shaped by invisible forces without my consent or consideration, the impact of which disconnected me from my cultural inheritance as a member of the African Diaspora. Ultimately, it gave rise to a deep desire to guide my people toward our righteous collective destiny.

*When you think about the role of community development in supporting people's self-discovery and collective destiny, what are the implications for the kinds of institutions we need to build?*

**Johan:** One of the first things I noticed as I began to live in the diverse, urban communities of the United States was that the landlord, teacher, policeman, doctor, loan officer, and politician are all different from you, especially if you're identified as Black. In these communities, the physical and social infrastructure are maladapted instruments of Eurocentricity and white hegemony. Unsurprisingly, this disconnection, which is by design, precedes vast, racially defined inequities in housing, education, criminality, health, economics, and politics.

Creating institutions that are controlled by members of the community they are intended to serve is a promising path out of this inequity. Unfortunately, that is not the goal of this system. Consequently, community development, as it is largely practiced today, will never lead to any real or lasting change. Homegrown institutions represent an opportunity to create social infrastructure that emerges out of and is responsive to a community's essential qualities and needs. They are spaces that not only reduce the harms caused by the disconnected systems that litter our communities, they allow us to create value that can be sustained intergenerationally. They reinforce the idea that you belong in your community.

*What are the barriers that keep homegrown institutions serving communities of color from starting ... or from thriving when they are started?*

**Johan:** I would say the first is a cultural barrier of miseducation, formally implemented through the school system but also informally through media and the specific roles we see ourselves cast in.

This miseducation has misshapen our identity and diminished our sense of self. For example, if you were miseducated to think that all you are is a descendant of slaves, as opposed to the descendants of Kings and Queens, you're going to now pick up the tools of education or finance and use them in vastly different ways. One will use them to escape their circumstances and live like there is no tomorrow, the other will use them to build a kingdom. In community development, it's common practice to describe beneficiaries as helpless victims in need of intervention. This too miseducates us about what is possible.





The second barrier is the disconnection that miseducation facilitates. If you're born into a community where you don't see anyone like you holding any positions of power and it's been that way for generations, you're likely to become disconnected from those institutions as well as from the possible roles that you could play in your own community.

That disconnection also breeds doubt in the people who aren't from your community but *do* hold institutional power, like the loan officer whose limited personal experience prior to his role leads him to believe that Black people aren't equipped to organize thriving businesses. He prejudices. That *racial prejudice* inclines him to ask a bit more questions of a Black applicant than others, causing less Black applicants to make it through to an approval. This act of *racial discrimination* may be repeated dozens of times in interactions between that institution and individual applicants of color. When this dynamic continues to play out within the finance industry in a particular community, we see *racial inequity* – disproportionately less thriving Black businesses than others. That inequity is what the next generation of aspiring business owners and loan officers enter into, and it reinforces the story that the loan officer had in the first place, that Black people aren't equipped to run a thriving business, and the self-fulfilling cycle is reinforced, from prejudice to prophecy.

The third and most insurmountable barrier is that outside communities benefit from the status quo. In schools, for example, we can imagine a kind-hearted teacher, who commutes an hour every day to teach a class in a diverse, urban school. She is unable to relate to her students, but there's a teacher shortage, and she needs the job. Unfortunately, she has a difficult time with the class and ends up kicking an energetic Black boy out of the classroom. The school recommends that he take medication, but his mother declines. Her husband, a police officer, who also commutes an hour to work in this community, ends up locking that boy up because now he's in the streets instead of at school. That boy is then sent to a juvenile facility located in the teacher's community, where two of her cousins serve as prison guards. Once the boy is released, his parole officer recommends he be sent back to jail for failing a drug test, so he loses his job working for her brother-in-law, who owns a local fast food franchise.

When we consider this story in the context of the often expressed data point that the boy, a Black male, is at least three times more likely to get kicked out of class, put in jail, and once released, return to jail, we can recognize that this system impacts these two communities in diametrically opposed ways: one represents a thriving livelihood; the other, perpetual poverty.

*That really resounds with dominant community development narratives we're uncovering around perceived risk, perceived lack of capabilities, and blaming individuals instead of systems. Another that comes to mind is the Blank Slate narrative, where the sector is willing to resource outsiders to come into communities of color and test their ideas, without any real engagement or resident leadership.*

**Johan:** Unfortunately, there's an inclination in our communities to accept any improvement as progress. If a community of color experiences a homelessness crisis, for example, then when local funds are made available for outside investors to build an affordable housing complex, people tend to see it as progress because there's likely been no improvement in the situation for some time. Thus, it seems like every investment is an impact investment, even though no wealth or lasting change is being created in that community. In many of these projects, residents neither benefit from the income, nor experience the sense of pride in doing the work. Often, the community doesn't control, or even provide input, over what work is done. Both the community members and the municipality may perceive a good investment and a problem solved, but there's no recognition of the true problem: a house is not a home.

Furthermore, if no one in that community owns the properties developed, or the income generated by that labor leaves, we have now made that community more vulnerable to gentrification. If someone else owns it, who will be enriched when the rent is raised or property sold? It's also often the case that, what we have to do to get something, we have to do to keep it. So we have to ask ourselves, do we plan to continuously incentivize outsiders to solve these problems? Are these outsiders committed to sustaining their solution? Are they going to be with that community when funding runs out?

*What are the consequences you're seeing when it comes to these narratives preventing investment in homegrown institutions?*

**Johan:** On the human scale, we're disconnecting people from their role in their story. As a result, they fail to see themselves as heroes. The implications of this are vast. When there's a problem, not only is there a disinclination to solve it, there's a disbelief that you can solve it. This disbelief is inherited by the next generation, and once you're psychologically and socially disconnected from your own possibility, it seems as though you're "the first" and that you are alone. You embrace your disinheritance and may even disregard the efforts of your peers because you intend to be 'the one'. Each generation is starting over when they should be learning from their ancestors and each other. This prolongs the problem and reinforces what we see today: people not owning or feeling like they belong in their own communities.

*Are you seeing any promising approaches to addressing under-resourcing of homegrown institutions?*

**Johan:** One promising approach I've committed to is co-design. When we create *with, not for*, an impacted community. The practice is catching on but is often done under the guise of engagement. We can think of the pathway out of the imposed and into the homegrown as starting with *outreach* – this is practiced by institutions that exist in a community but are not connected to its community members. In order to deliver their service, they realize they need to actually talk to the community and tell them about what they have to offer. They might even hire locals to be the face of the program.

When they move past that point, they get to *engagement*, where they recognize the need to have an exchange. Not just telling but actively listening. This process should lead to actual changes in the service delivery. Sometimes engagement is considerate enough to compensate community members for their time and ideas. Engagement moves us in the right direction and may even result in the co-creation of innovative services but often falls short of facilitating lasting change in the institutions themselves.

Next we move to *involvement*. This stage allows the intended beneficiaries and impacted stakeholders to not only become an integral component of the service design and delivery, from inspiration and ideation to implementation and evaluation, it invites the community to be a part of leadership of the institution. Unfortunately, this can lead to tokenization. Especially, if you are the only one from your community who's been invited to the table.

Ultimately, in this economic system, we need to graduate to a level of *ownership*, where the community members have a stake in the future of the enterprise, personally and collectively. To get to this point, we need to start supporting people who are directly impacted by the problem to learn how to solve the problem, as opposed to paying outsiders who are *not* impacted by the problem to professionally *not* solve it.

*Is there anything else you think people should think about when it comes to homegrown institutions?*

**Johan:** Home is where you belong. It is where you're safe enough to heal, grow, evolve, and become whoever you decide to be. Homegrown institutions facilitate that; they honor the essential capacities of the people in every community because they are *made for them*. The underlying value of the homegrown institution is that they are regenerative. They regenerate latent talents and core capabilities that have been disabled in response to a hostile or enabling environment.

An imposed institution is like applying an artificial prosthetic in place of a missing organ. This can be helpful, even life saving, but homegrown institutions allow us to permanently move beyond the prosthetic. They facilitate lasting change and allow us, whoever we are, to truly feel at home in our community.

*Johan Matthews is the Founder and Principal of Mutual Design, where he coaches and collaborates with local leaders and institutions to co-design and implement equitable change strategies. He also serves as the Community Engagement Facilitator at The Cooperative Fund of the Northeast, where he facilitates the development of equitable co-op ecosystems and provides culturally-informed technical assistance to ensure that communities excluded from economic investment can engage in cooperative enterprise.*

*The interviewee is responding to the findings shared in the Anti-Racist Community Development Research Project, produced with support from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) to increase understanding of structural racism in community development and pathways to racially equitable outcomes that promote health equity. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of RWJF or ThirdSpace Action Lab.*

# ARTIST'S WORK: JOE WILLIAMS

Joe Williams (Wahpéthuŋwaŋ Dakota) is director of Native American programs at Plains Art Museum in Fargo and a 2023 Bush Foundation Fellow. Williams is a storyboard artist with an MFA in visual effects from the Academy of Art University and a BA in American Indian Studies from the University of South Dakota.



ARTWORK BY JOE WILLIAMS



# CITY OF THE MIDDLE SEAS

ZAINA BERRI

**in a city of the middle seas**

so many faces go unseen

**hidden behind their unsung songs**

and hellos and so longs

**where is the place where they can roam free**

sing, dance, and share fully

**has it always been hidden underneath**

unraveling piece by piece?

**is it in their smiles or their tears?**

fading slowly year by year


**where is the place in the city of the middle seas**

where they find who they are and who they want to be

*Zaina Berri is a Lebanese-American artist. She served as one of five artist researcher partners in ThirdSpace's Storied Communities, Community Stories project. Raised by a single, first-generation immigrant Lebanese mother, Zaina has been writing songs since she was nine years old. Her work has been profiled in publications like Live in the D, The National Post United Kingdom, and Press & Guide.*



Policy has historically played an enormous role in how our country and our communities approach the intersection of race, place, and wealth. Interviewees share their thoughts on the legacy of racism in community development policy and what anti-racist community development policy can look like.



“If the ground is not ready to **ABSORB** money, the money runs off. So if you are the federal government, and you’re trying to actually ... make a difference in disinvested communities, then having a fast timetable for when the money gets deployed and committed is not a maximum amount of change per dollar. Because ‘shovel-ready’, ‘worthy’ ... projects ready to go are often [done by] the people who have been funded to do the pre-development work that makes the projects ready to go, and that’s **NOT SOMETHING YOU SEE** in disinvested communities. The **GOOD NEWS** is more money ... and the **BAD NEWS** is that some of it is set up programmatically in ways that are not likely to maximize the impact.”

- ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE

American Rescue Plan Act “money has been a **GAME CHANGER** ... We’ve seen **MONEY BEING INFUSED** in these neighborhoods that we have **NOT SEEN IN YEARS**, and actually, I don’t even know **WHEN IF EVER WE’LL GET THAT LEVEL OF INVESTMENT** [again] ... Money has been connected to ... being able to buy vacant properties ... They’re using it to **LITERALLY FILL THE GAP** on projects.”

- ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE

“**LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION** is where the rubber meets the road, and honestly, **WHERE STRUCTURAL RACISM IS REALLY BUILT FROM THE GROUND UP** at this point ... Public housing ... was a federal program ... but local communities had to opt in. So places that didn’t want public housing to be constructed just simply did not form a housing authority. You have communities that embraced ... public housing ... oftentimes for the wrong reason, to tear down ... what they called slums ... The **LOCAL SORTING ALWAYS HAPPENS, PARTICULARLY WHEN** ... the federal government or state government ... passes policies where ... **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY OR EXTREMELY FLEXIBLE**, and the local ... governments and partners can have a lot of flexibility in **HOW** they use the resources **TO HARM** or **TO HELP**.”


- ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE



“I would **CHANGE THE COMPETITIVE [FUNDING] PROCESS.** It’s **NOT DESIGNED FOR NATIVE ORGANIZATIONS AND TRIBES** to participate in. Quite often, there [are] limits on indirect [expenses] which is **HARD FOR US** ... We see it so often, **ESPECIALLY FROM THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT** ... We have to pay the rent or mortgage ... They don’t want to pay for that ... The process of application ... it’s not easy, especially in the affordable housing arena. **IT’S SET UP ... FOR SUCCESS FOR STANDARD DEVELOPERS.** It’s not set up for an organization like us ... who want to just get into this work. It’s such a gamble. If we’re successful, we’ll keep doing it. **IF WE’RE NOT SUCCESSFUL, THEN WE’RE DONE.**”

**- ANTI-RACIST  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
INTERVIEWEE**





“[Working in city] government, I want to **MOVE THE BUREAUCRACY NEEDLE** ... We ... can’t have process, can’t have progress, **WITHOUT FIRST HEALING FROM THE TRAUMA** [historically and currently experienced in communities of color] ... We’re never going to be on the same page without healing from the trauma.”

**- ANTI-RACIST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INTERVIEWEE**



# PENCIL TO PAPER: WHAT DO I DO NOW?

That's the story. It's getting told all the time, whether we're paying attention to it or not. It may not be a primary focus of day-to-day community development work, but the choice is clear: do we want to craft our own story, one that's authentic to our communities, or do we continue to let dominant narratives shape biases against communities of color?

At ThirdSpace, we suggest that it's time to practice. We don't have to get it perfect, and we don't have to devote every moment to story and narrative. But we *should* explore what a continual cycle of awareness-building could do to advance the cause. The contributors to this issue have given us some tools for practicing how we analyze information, create a narrative vision + plan, and get to work implementing it.

## OFFERING 1: CHECK THE SOURCE MATERIAL.

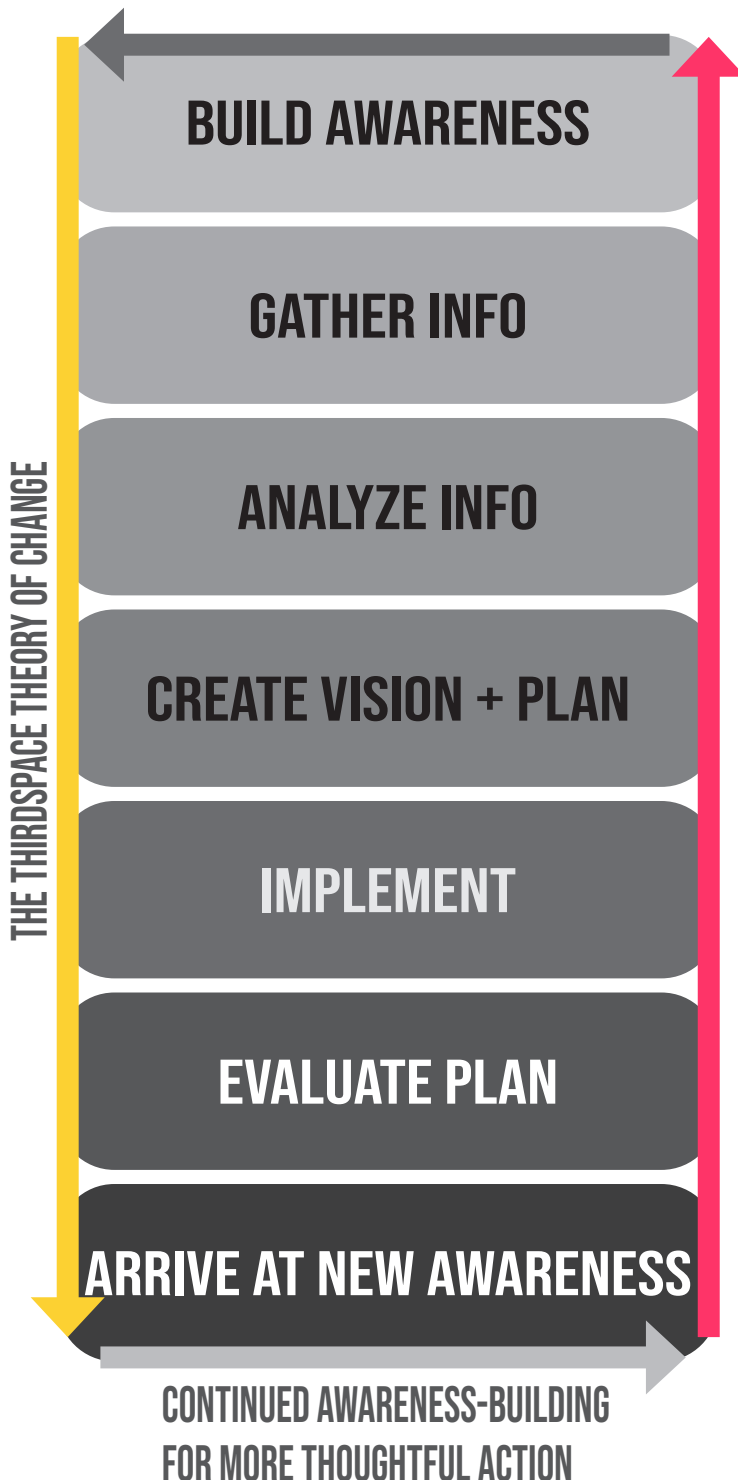
In this issue, we profiled two new resources that give you the analysis you need to start critically examining both resident voice and equitable narrative in community development. Spend a little time with our research to get yourself grounded.

## OFFERING 2: SPEND TIME IN THE REFLECTION.

Now that you've looked at the underlying research, it's time to select what kind of vision you want to build and who you want to do it with - by yourself, within your organization, or with members of a broader community. Select either the Community Development Narrative toolkit or the Resident Voice conversation guide, and use the prompts to get your planning going.

## OFFERING 3: DO THE TABLE READ.

Once you have some initial thoughts jotted down about how you want to move forward, it's time to get testing. Remember, the goal isn't to get it perfect the first time - it's to practice. Identify a few opportunities to get things in motion. The best early steps are those that can produce results without a ton of resources or time; that give opportunities for broader stakeholder feedback; and that can get people excited about moving in a more racially equitable direction.



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