

The People's Practice

**ISSUE #07:
WILL WE SINK, FLOAT, OR EMERGE?**



FEBRUARY 2025

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT + ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUE

WELL ...

the time for debating whether we should be paying attention to climate change or environmental justice is clearly over.

**OUR COMMUNITIES ARE DRASTICALLY,
DEMONSTRABLY, AND INCREASINGLY SELF-
EVIDENTLY CONTAMINATED. ON FIRE. UNINSURABLE.
STORM-BATTERED. OVERHEATED. UNDERWATER.**

And if you've developed even a cursory understanding of how segregation, disinvestment, and gentrification work in the United States, you're not going to be surprised about who's living with the biggest impacts of climate change. Black residents face much higher risks of hurricanes and flooding. Industries that release toxic chemicals and contaminants into the air are far closer on average to Black communities than white communities. Black, Latino, and Native communities are more susceptible to wildfires. Black, Asian, and Latino neighborhoods face greater impacts from urban heat islands, with fewer of the cooling effects of trees and parks. With this kind of geographic reality, the results aren't surprising. People of color, and especially children of color, bear the brunt of the elevated negative health outcomes related to climate change.

**YES, THE CONSEQUENCES OF CLIMATE CHANGE ARE
ALREADY BEING FELT. WHERE WE GO IN THE FUTURE,
THOUGH, IS STILL LARGELY UP TO US.**

There's a world where we fail to act and make the crisis even more dire, where our communities sink under the weight of inaction.

There's a world where we manage to just float along, making modest, incremental changes, and holding off the worst outcomes, but still experiencing incredible harm.

And there's a world where we emerge from the current crisis not only with a healthier, more sustainable environment, but also with one that opens up new social and financial opportunities for everyone in our communities.

For those of us in community development, we see a fourth scenario. While we all face dire consequences of climate inaction, the most structurally disadvantaged among us – globally, regionally, and down to a block-by-block level – are also the ones most likely to bear the brunt of environmental catastrophe. Yes, a small proportion of people may be able to outrun and even to profit off of a failing planet.

For the rest of us, well, things aren't looking great.

That does not mean we succumb to hopelessness. An environmentally just world – and even an environmentally joyful world – is possible. We don't give up. We enter into the work clear-eyed and committed. Fortunately, the people we spoke to in this issue lifted up many opportunities to advance a more environmentally just scenario – whether we're architects, artists, funders, organizers, policymakers, or workforce development professionals.

This issue, we invite you to dig deep into our community's soil health – so we can all thrive in an environment that sustains change. Deepen your understanding of both the challenges and opportunities facing us. Explore the ways that environmental justice and community development already intersect and how we can all make those connections even stronger. And consider your own role in mitigating crisis, adapting to new realities, and stewarding our collective resources.

Onward.

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ARTIST'S WORK:

KAYLA KOSAKI

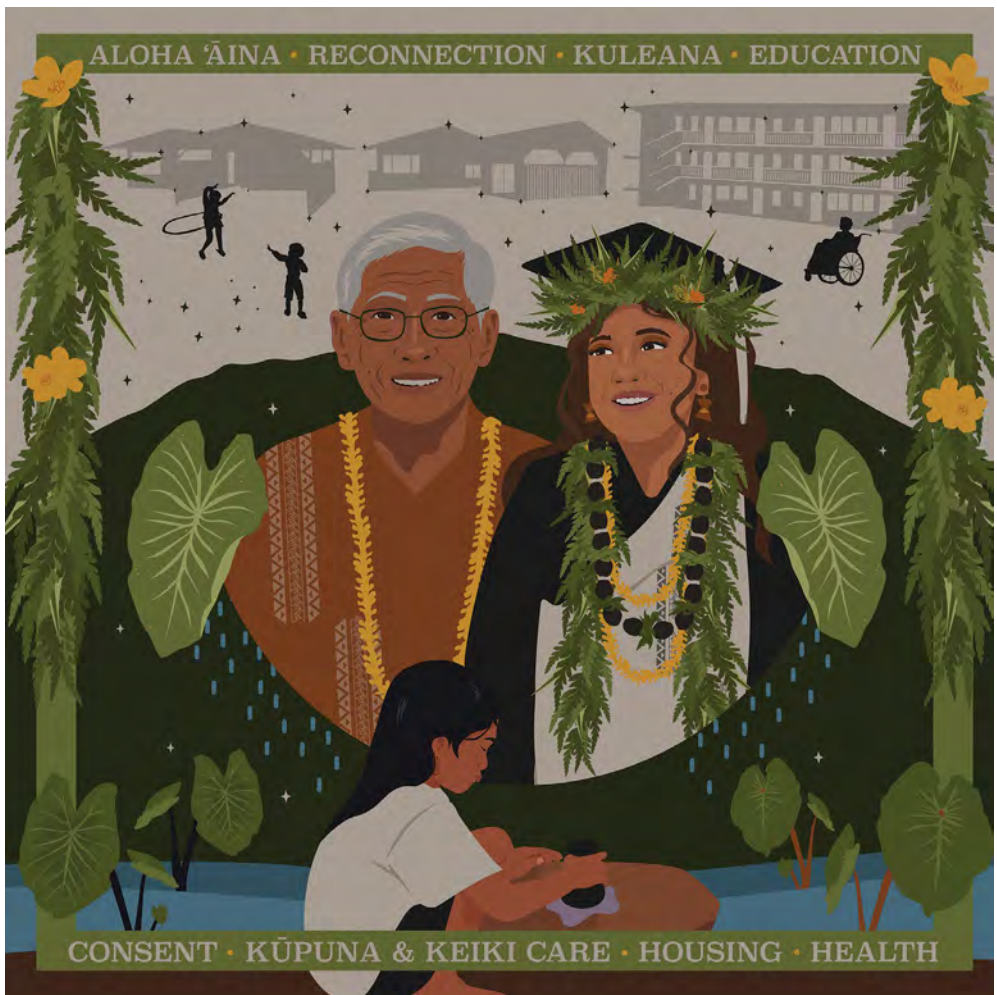
Kayla Yukie Kosaki is a queer yonsei uchinanchu community-taught artist living in Cleveland, Ohio. Born and raised in Hilo, Hawai'i, her work toward social justice is guided by her love and responsibility to the many communities she's privileged to be a part of. As an artist, she creates visual invitations to liberatory futures worth fighting for. Working in collaboration with change-makers across movements and sectors, she creates with the intention of centering self reflection, solidarity, and truth to inspire collective action.

These pieces are a love letter to two places I've been privileged to call home.

When I imagine a future with anti-racist community development, I think of this country's responsibility to radically course correct historic and contemporary injustices, beginning with reparations to Black and Indigenous peoples. Reparations, as in the return of stolen land, labor, wealth, and power to oppressed communities – plus interest.

In the Hawaiian language, waiwai, the word for wealth (not just economic, but also in the strength of community and relationships), has roots in the abundance of wai (water). What would community development look like if this definition of wealth was centered, recognizing water as not just a life giving force but one that carries memory? What would it look like if the expertise prioritized was how well you know your neighbors and the knowledge of how the neighborhood has changed over the years? With investment in locals' well being prioritized over cutting costs or profits?

A future of anti-racist community development centers communities' agency, unique cultures, and multiple ways of knowing. It is a future not absent of conflict nor afraid of hard truths, but one with invitations to learn together and move through challenges with care and trust. It is a return of power to community decision-making and self-determination, a prioritization of consent and collective healing, ultimately leading to a future of generational thriving and joy.



HILO

A mixed-race Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) graduate, adorned with celebratory lei and kīhei (a Hawaiian wrap) smiling next to their elder father. Behind them is the night sky with constellations of different homes and silhouettes of community members – an elder resting and children playing above Mauna Kea. Below the graduate and their dad, rain is falling onto variations of kūpuna (elder, ancestral) varieties of kalo (taro). In the foreground is a child pounding pa'i'ai (undiluted poi) . Framing the image are the written values of aloha 'āina (love of the land), reconnection, kuleana (responsibility and rights in relation to genealogy and place), education, consent, kūpuna & keiki (child) care, housing, and health.



CLEVELAND

A person wearing a shirt that says, “The opposite of poverty is not wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice. – Bryan Stevenson,” holds a megaphone tagged with the Palestinian and trans flag stickers. To their right, there’s an Ohio historical marker that says “Land Back, Reparations, Abolition, and Liberation.” Behind them, a pregnant Black femme with flowers and stars in her hair holding her belly with their child hugging her from behind. In the sky are constellations and silhouettes of community members, empowered, active, and connected by shared power in front of different homes. Framing the image are flowers native to Ohio with the written values of generational wealth, safety, ease, healing, balance, connection, interdependence, and joy.



GOING TO THE ROOT, BRINGING BACK THE TREES

AN IN(TE)RVIEW WITH SAMIRA MALONE

We got to catch up with **Samira Malone** about the state of urban forestry in the United States, why it's critical to equitable community development, and how we can do a better job of making that connection.

To start, could you share what environmental justice means to you?

Going to the root and rectifying the fact that many communities of color have intentionally been developed on land that was considered environmentally hazardous or directly proximate to environmental hazards. Justice looks like action. It's not just acknowledgement; there needs to be restoration and healing. Environmental justice is also stewardship and investment for the future.

Can you speak more to the roles of urban forestry, parks, and greenspace as a community development strategy?

Many cities have experienced a significant decline in urban canopy over the last several decades. Neighborhoods with the smallest tree canopy often have the highest issues with cardiovascular and respiratory health and typically fall within redlined communities. There has been a historical, systematic disinvestment in caring for natural assets in Black and brown and low-income communities. There cannot be community development where people live in thriving environments without a thoughtful account for how we steward our natural environment.

I'm curious to hear about some approaches that you've seen across the country that you thought were really promising.

Successful tree canopy growth projects prioritize establishment, maintenance, care, and workforce development. Workforce development, in particular, presents a unique and critical opportunity to make significant investments in nature-based jobs – an area where Black and brown communities have historically been excluded. The environmental stewardship field remains predominantly white, despite the fact that tree canopy exists in Black and brown neighborhoods as well. It is essential that the care and stewardship of these spaces be led by people from these communities.

This approach is about more than just workforce equity – it's a call to reconnect with ancestral knowledge. For centuries, Indigenous people have been stewards of this land, and the forced labor of Black people, especially through chattel slavery, was foundational to the agricultural and land-based economy of this country. Reclaiming that legacy of stewardship is a form of restoration and reparation. What would it look like to reintroduce ancestral environmental practices of care and stewardship as a core element of our future strategies? This question invites us to think beyond growth and towards holistic, community-driven care for our shared urban forest.

Are you seeing any organizations that are doing strong, equitable work on those fronts?

During my time at the Cleveland Tree Coalition (CTC), we supported initiatives with grant funding, helping to strengthen local capacity and deepen community engagement. These community-based organizations play a critical role in fostering a sense of stewardship, ownership, and care for the city's tree canopy, ensuring that environmental benefits are accessible to all neighborhoods, especially those that have been historically underserved.

A powerful example is the Rid-All Green Partnership, which transformed a neglected dumping site once known as the "Forgotten Triangle" into a thriving community resource. Today, Rid-All operates a tree nursery within the city – a significant achievement

considering that most tree nurseries in the region are located outside of Cleveland. This shift addresses a critical supply chain challenge that has long hindered efforts to scale up the city's urban forest. By growing trees locally, Rid-All creates a more accessible and sustainable inventory for planting projects while reducing reliance on external suppliers.

What makes Rid-All's approach especially noteworthy is its emphasis on circular economy principles. They produce their own densely nutrient-rich soil on-site, using recyclable and compostable materials processed through their farm operations. This "waste-to-resource" model not only supports tree cultivation but also enables the growth of fresh fruits and produce, which are sold back to the community at affordable rates. This approach provides a triple benefit — improving environmental health, supporting local food systems, and creating economic opportunities for residents.

We're seeing more communities adopt this less exploitative, hyperlocal model, where local materials, labor, and knowledge are leveraged for community benefit. Historically, major corporations have monopolized access to inventory, materials, and contracts in urban forestry and green infrastructure. By supporting community-led efforts like Rid-All, we're challenging that dynamic and reclaiming local stewardship. These approaches are essential to building a more just, sustainable, and self-sufficient urban forestry system.

What are some other hopes you have for the future and moving towards a more environmentally just world?

I hope that the environmental landscape continues to open up and leave real reverence for community perspectives – not just to be heard, but to be centered and given autonomy and agency to carry out the work. There also has to be a continued pipeline to continue to invest in this work. We are going to continue to deal with exacerbated climate hazards and Black, brown, and other vulnerable communities are going to be on the frontline. If we're not thinking about how community development could be leveraged as a strategy for fortifying our communities for what we know is on the horizon, we are willingly putting them in harm's way.

What do you think sustaining the work looks like beyond a federal windfall of funds?

I hope that all of the federal provisions that are being made possible through these federal block grants are being leveraged smartly and we see more investment in sustainability work. We need to figure out mosaic funding approaches to sustain this investment after five years. What does it look like to be able to leverage federal funds to tap into additional resources? Environmental assets have to be a municipal priority, because they are pieces of infrastructure, one of the few pieces of infrastructure that don't decline in value over time.

Is there anything else that you want to make sure people don't lose sight of?

If we're thinking about this through a lens of community and economic development, we need to start thinking about the infrastructure that we're going to need to accommodate climate refugees. That's been a conversation on the periphery in the climate space, but we're heading toward a time where people are going to have to make mass exoduses out of parts of this country because they are going to be far too unlivable. For underinvested regions that people might be more likely to move to, we have natural assets that we can be leveraging and investing in to make them livable places not only for the people who are already here but for new arrivals. If done thoughtfully, investments in our environmental conditions can really fortify an even stronger community.

Samira Malone is the National Urban Forestry Portfolio Lead at the [Urban Sustainability Directors Network](#), where she works to enhance equitable access to urban tree canopy and advance climate resilience efforts across the country. She previously served as Executive Director of the [Cleveland Tree Coalition](#). Samira holds a bachelor's in urban and regional planning, a master's in urban planning and development, and GIS certification.

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT, A CALL FOR EQUITABLE URBAN TRANSFORMATION

CHRISTA STONEHAM

Houston, a city born on the banks of the bayou, has always been a hub of industry and innovation. From its early days, the oil and gas trades, the sprawling networks of railroads, and the heavy machinery that powered the Industrial Revolution fueled the city's growth. Immigrant workers flocked to Houston, settling near these burgeoning industries, their lives intertwined with the very lifeblood of the city's economy. However, as Houston expanded and transformed into the sprawling metropolis we know today, these communities remained tethered to the remnants of the industrial era, now living in the shadows of brownfield sites – properties tainted by pollution and the passage of time.

The history of Houston's development is marked by a lack of zoning, a reality that has left its communities particularly vulnerable to the consequences of industrialization. In a city where residential neighborhoods often sit side by side with industrial sites, the legacy of environmental neglect is stark. The immigrant workers and their descendants who once built this city now find themselves living in the remnants of an industrial past, surrounded by contamination and pollution.

Environmental justice in Houston is about more than just cleaning up these contaminated sites. It is about addressing the systemic inequities that have left these communities to bear the brunt of environmental degradation. It is about acknowledging that these neighborhoods – many of which are home to people of color and low-income families – are the most vulnerable in a city without zoning laws to protect them. But environmental justice also extends beyond the remediation of land and air; it is intrinsically linked to the availability of affordable housing.

Affordable housing is a cornerstone of environmental justice. As we work to redevelop brownfield sites, we must also ensure that the resulting developments do not displace the very communities they are intended to benefit. Too often, urban revitalization leads to gentrification, pushing out long-term residents who can no longer afford to live in their own neighborhoods. For redevelopment to be truly just, it must include affordable housing options that allow current residents to remain and thrive in their communities.

At the [Houston Land Bank \(HLB\)](#), our approach to brownfield redevelopment is rooted in principles of environmental justice. We are not just cleaning up contaminated sites; we are creating spaces where all Houstonians can live, work, and play – spaces that are safe, healthy, and affordable. Two prime examples of our work are the Yellow Cab and Velasco projects, which illustrate our commitment to these principles.

The former [Yellow Cab](#) headquarters, a six-acre property, took four years to clean up due to significant contamination. While it may not have been considered shovel-ready, the site's transformation demonstrates the value of persistence in brownfield redevelopment. Today, the site is being developed into a mixed-use, affordable housing community that

will serve both single-family and multi-family residents, with housing options available to those earning up to 120% of the Area Median Income. This project is being envisioned alongside with the community and stands as a testament to the fact that even the most challenging sites can be reclaimed and revitalized to serve the community.

Similarly, the Velasco project was a 70-year-abandoned trash incinerator which was awarded a \$5 million grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up and transform into a greenspace in May 2024. This project, like Yellow Cab, will involve a complex and lengthy cleanup process, but the results will reflect transformative community desires. Both projects are examples of how brownfield redevelopment can be leveraged to address both environmental and housing inequities.

Yet, despite the pressing needs, we have limited resources to address these brownfield sites. The process of acquiring, remediating, and redeveloping these properties is complex and resource-intensive, often beyond the reach of the communities most affected. But this is where HLB steps in. We are working closely with government agencies, philanthropy, and regulators to address the challenges left behind by an era before environmental regulation took hold. Our efforts are focused on not just cleaning up these sites but also on ensuring that the benefits of redevelopment, including affordable housing, are equitably distributed.

We believe that brownfield redevelopment in Houston must be about more than just economic gain; it must be about restoring a sense of agency and ownership to the communities that have long been disenfranchised. The history of Houston is rich with the contributions of residents, and it is only fitting that these communities have a say in the future of the city they helped build.

As we move forward, HLB is committed to ensuring that the voices of these communities are heard and that their needs are met. Environmental justice is not just a goal; it is a mandate – a call to action for all of us to build a more equitable and just city. The work ahead is challenging, but it is also filled with promise. By working together, we can transform the legacy of industrialization into a future of opportunity, empowerment, and affordable housing for all Houstonians.

Christa Stoneham is the Chief Executive Officer of the Houston Land Bank, where she leads innovative urban redevelopment initiatives focused on equity, environmental justice, and community empowerment. With over two decades of experience in community development, Christa is a champion for affordable housing and the transformation of contaminated brownfield sites. Christa holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Architecture, as well as a Master's degree in Community Development from Prairie View A&M University.

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TRANSFORMATION IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

AN IN(TER)VIEW WITH BENNY STARR

We caught up with **Benny Starr** to talk about artists' roles in environmental justice and community development and the criticality of multidisciplinary approaches to advancing equity.

Before we jump in, is there anything you want to share about “Breathe”?

One of my art forms is hip-hop lyricism, and that's deeply rooted in Black vocal traditions. To connect this sense of place, I traveled to a specific location in South Carolina to write and then record this piece with collaborators. The piece explores environmental justice and community development as essential topics for everyone to consider. How do we, as artists, demystify these concepts through a creative lens? As a hip-hop artist, I've honed skills like observation, empathy, understanding, and the ability to analyze and alchemize experiences. Communicating an idea is one thing, but making people feel it is another.

Could you talk about the significance of process?

We often aim straight for the final result, but the creative process is where transformation and learning happen. One of my collaborators frequently quotes Quincy Jones, who said, “When you go to create something, leave enough space for God to enter the room.” An unpredictable, beautiful unfolding happens when you embrace the process. That's why I favor the term “creative process” over “creativity,” because the latter implies that creativity appears fully formed. It rarely does, nor does justice, development, or movement work. The journey is just as critical as the destination.

You've talked before about “creating to fail” as an intention, which I find particularly interesting applied to community development.

At the U.S. Water Alliance, I learned that people in the water sector often have to mitigate risk, whereas artists courageously create with the possibility of failure in mind. Failure generates valuable insights. I don't think we can tackle justice issues without making room for failure. While mitigating risk is vital, especially when people's health and well-being are at stake, I believe in creating spaces where failure is acceptable. The lessons learned from failure can be analyzed and applied, which is even more beneficial to collective well-being. This is where collaboration between artists and other sectors becomes fruitful.

How do you think about success, and how do you define that?

Success, for me, incorporates power dynamics. How do you equitably compensate people for their time and labor? How do you thoughtfully engage communities to learn what they truly want? How do you support their self-determination towards long-term ownership and equity? Success in community development is hollow if it denies people the process of contemplating, connecting, and imagining their past, present, and future. Without a process that considers power, the work can't be a true success.

Your song “The Water Keeps Rising” touches on topics like gentrification, racial inequality, environmental justice, and economic development. That feels like it speaks to our research finding that anti-racist community development is holistic.

I don't live a siloed life — my economic, physical, and spiritual well-being all intersect. For instance, how do I encounter nature? What is nature's state when I encounter it? Is my community walkable? Do I have access to healthy food? Am I within reach of those who love me? Where do I go to fortify my spiritual self? We're taught to compartmentalize these aspects, but they are critical parts of our daily lives. “The Water Keeps Rising” emerged from encounters I had living in Charleston, SC — seeing rapid, soulless development

despite climate change impacts, varying degrees of deeply entrenched systemic racism, and rising unhoused populations. One day, I was walking downtown, and I gave a woman experiencing homelessness \$20 for some food, and I contemplated that for a while. Who benefits, and who feels the pain of rapid development? The creative and artistic process requires us to question what we encounter, leading to a deeper understanding of what communities need to thrive. Especially in today's climate, it is necessary to demystify the process and commit to it as a culturally rich, community-driven act.

The other thing your music did was make this link between place-based and national issues very organically. It's a modern Charleston story with themes that resonate across time and place.

Focusing on the local often resonates nationally and internationally because of how interconnected people and systems are. Rising sea levels, economic disparities, and housing crises aren't unique to Charleston, SC. The creative process is a conscious encounter with the world around us, which ushers us into process of creation. In my community, the word "conscious" embodies an understanding of how systems work with, for, or against us alongside compassion, empathy, and spirituality. These qualities are foundational to environmental justice and community development.

Why is it important to specifically talk about environmental justice and community development in terms of Black people in the United States?

We're still grappling with a system built on genocide, enslavement, and exploitation. By 1910, Black people had acquired 16-18 million acres of land; today, that's down to about 3 million acres due to systemic racism and exploitation. Land, and relationship to it, is liberation. Without collective ownership or spaces to reflect, connect, imagine, and build upon, how do we create the communities we want? Safe, healthy, caring, just communities. As Toni Morrison said, "The very serious function of racism is distraction." It keeps us from doing our work, imagining, and stepping into our power.

What are some hopes you have for moving towards a more environmentally just world?

I have hope in the subversion of unjust systems. I hope we birth a renaissance where culture and creative process become tools we utilize across vocations — teachers, doctors, spiritual workers — to take back power and collectively imagine a shared world 100 years into the future.

Are there any promising equitable or anti-racist strategies that you're seeing?

I'm inspired by the work of [Communities First Fund](#) and programs like [Ashé Cultural Arts Center's "I Deserve It,"](#) which partners with hospitals to create community ambassadors who visit elders hesitant about medical care. [CultureRx](#) prescribes not only medicine but also cultural activities — like visiting a museum with family — to address the lack of community and meaningful relationships, which have serious health implications. Some of the solutions are right in front of us.

Is there anything else that you'd like to speak to that hasn't come up?

I'm a hopeful person, and that doesn't mean being weak or naïve. It's a discipline. It's a practice. As hopeful people, the work of demystifying community development is going to be critical. Simply put, doing this work together, redirecting resources, and moving in courageous, strategic ways. Incorporating that approach can help birth a renaissance of thinking, of feeling, of being together. That's our work on every level. Our work is our people, and with our people, always.

Benny Starr positions his art to drive attention to justice and kinship. He served as the U.S. Water Alliance's inaugural One Water Artist-in-Residence and as their Senior Fellow of Arts & Culture. He currently serves as a Creative Strategist for Communities First Fund and launched Watercolor Creative, an umbrella for artistic projects, creative strategy, and social practice with equity-centered partners.



WORK OF ART:

BREATHE

BENNY STARR

The breath of life brings fruit to bear,
Through thorned trees,
Rooted soil and air.

A breath that flows, not just as wind,
But in waves—like sounds of returning kin,
Preserving sacred ways of being.

Before we wed ourselves to routine,
Lost in the maze of repetition unseen,
We were made to bear the weight of stories,
To hold fidelity,
To see every color's hue,
To design with art and melody,
And create what is new.

This breath of life, ever sublime,
Flows through caves descended, hills we climb.
It calls us— To feed our nature.

Feed it with rhythm, percussion, and snare,
With creativity and care.
Or starve it with greed—That ominous need,
Which takes far more than it ever receives
From the land, the air, and even the seas.

Still—

Built around being too Black to be Free.

But my mother is an artist.

My father is time.

Spirit, still moves,

still meets me with rhyme,

To remind you:

Breathe.

To remind you...

About your nature.

“Breathe” is a lyrical reflection on the sacred connection between nature, creativity, and liberation. It confronts environmental justice, Blackness, and nature, calling us to honor the breath of life that sustains and liberates.

Poetry & Performance: Benny Starr

Sound Design: Rodrick BinGichi

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE: EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN GREEN SPACES

LEONA MEDLEY

Within Detroit's Joe Louis Greenway, something powerful and real is happening: community takes root, camaraderie blossoms, and hope fills the air. Named after Joe Louis, the legendary boxer who broke barriers both inside and outside the ring, the Greenway honors his legacy by uniting people and paving the way for progress. Neighbors gather to share stories, laughter, and a palpable sense of possibility. While the nearly 30-mile trail is still under construction, it is already becoming much more than a pathway – it's a vibrant thread symbolizing connection, renewal, and progress across Detroit's most diverse neighborhoods.

Across the U.S., urban green spaces are redefining cities, becoming vital hubs for recreation, wellness, and community. Yet underserved communities are often excluded from these developments. The Joe Louis Greenway is changing that narrative, showcasing what's possible when equity and inclusion guide urban development.

A GREENWAY FOR EVERYONE

The Joe Louis Greenway is designed to benefit residents across all the communities it connects, including Detroit, Hamtramck, Highland Park, and Dearborn. It is a transformational space where everyone has free access to recreation and wellness, helping to reduce health disparities in neighborhoods where opportunities for exercise have been limited. With inviting paths for walking, biking, exercising, and gathering, the Greenway offers more than just a safe space – it's a sanctuary for physical health and mental well-being.

The Greenway also drives economic growth, encouraging local investment, home ownership, and empowering small business development in surrounding neighborhoods.

COMMUNITY VOICES AND PARTNERSHIPS AT THE CENTER

The Joe Louis Greenway Partnership, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, was established to bring a transformative vision to life – uniting neighborhoods through connection, renewal, and progress. What makes the Partnership truly unique is its foundation in community voice and vision. From the very beginning, residents have played a central role in its development through public meetings, listening sessions, and collaborative planning.

This process represents what the Joe Louis Greenway Partnership calls equity in action – a steadfast commitment to uplifting the voices of those who gather in these spaces and ensuring the plans reflect the community's needs and aspirations.

The Partnership has also brought together public and private stakeholders to drive this vision forward. Support from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, the City of Detroit, and local businesses underscores how collaboration and teamwork can spark real, lasting change.

A shining example of this commitment is the [Neighborhood Stories](#) project at Warren Gateway Park. Inspired by community suggestions, this initiative features art installations, murals, and sculptures that celebrate the histories of local Detroiters. It transforms the trail into a vibrant, living tribute to the city's rich culture – honoring its people and stories while creating a space for connection and inspiration.

A NATIONAL MODEL AND THE ROAD AHEAD

The Joe Louis Greenway is more than a local success – it's a model for cities nationwide. From Atlanta's BeltLine to Los Angeles' LA River revitalization, urban green spaces are tackling racial and economic disparities, and Detroit is at the forefront. By prioritizing equity and community engagement, the Greenway demonstrates how trails and parks can address environmental, social, and economic challenges within cities.

As the Greenway grows, so does its power to uplift the community. Beautification projects, like six community-selected murals, inspire neighborhood pride, while upcoming wellness and sustainability events promise a deeper, lasting impact for Detroit.

But the work is far from over. Ongoing investment – both financial and social – is vital to sustaining and expanding the Greenway's impact. We invite residents, businesses, and organizations to join this mission by committing to green spaces that are accessible, equitable, and thriving for all.

The Joe Louis Greenway is not just a trail – it's a living testament to the power of community, unity, and shared vision. As we walk, bike, and gather along its path, let it spark a vision of a city – and a nation – where opportunity knows no boundaries, where every voice is honored, and where everyone has the chance to flourish in a green space.

Leona Medley is the Executive Director of the [Joe Louis Greenway Partnership](#), working to connect Detroit communities through inclusive green space initiatives.

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WHERE ORGANIZING KEEPS US ALIVE

AN IN(TER)VIEW WITH ANNA RONDON

We caught up with **Anna Rondon** to talk about how environmental issues are impacting indigenous peoples in the American Southwest and just how critical environmental justice organizing is.

Tell us about your work. What about your work gets you excited?

New Mexico Social Justice & Equity Institute started in 2014 to pursue health impact assessments on wage theft in Gallup, New Mexico, and also uranium mine waste and health outcomes. We work closely with the National Collaborative for Health Equity, as one of 19 partners in the Health Equity Collaboratives. We also have a state partner called the New Mexico Health Equity Partnership.

I got into community defense around the Red Power Movement in the '60s and the takeover of Alcatraz. I was involved in the American Indian Movement in Oakland and was around very prominent leaders like Mary Crow Dog. You have to have a spiritual connection doing this work as indigenous peoples. We have a different worldview; it's complicated because of the boarding school experience. There's been a historic stripping away of who we are and taking our land, which has had horrible consequences for people, the environment, and our lack of recognition about what's happening. For instance, the American people don't know the dangers on the front end of the nuclear fuel chain, which is uranium mining.

How does environmental justice connect to community development and planning?

What many municipalities and other entities are using is an outdated, non-conforming way of doing planning and development that's been replicated over and over. From a Navajo perspective, we use the four sacred mountains for our planning and development.

Building training around knowing history first is also critical. Let's start with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. If people are serious about going to the root of racist practices, they need to read that we are still considered non-human. We are savages. African Americans are still three-fifths human. What are we doing here?

In terms of community development, community assessment surveys are critical in getting people's stories. Out here, the communities have to do a land use plan, so you have to implement some type of survey. In my experience, we did mark down all the contaminated water and soils into one land use plan by the Grand Canyon where there was a lot of mining. We took that land use plan to congressional folks, and they found money to clean it up and bring safe drinking water in trucks. That's how it can help.

What kinds of environmental issues are you up against today? What's the community doing around those issues?

We're creating more public health information. We're doing indigenous radical public health campaigns, where we go to the root cause and denounce the patriarchal theories that the universities perpetuate. Just by being in existence, that itself is "evidence-based".

We're trying to stop the Grand Canyon Pinyon Plain uranium mine. Navajo Nation stopped them from hauling raw material up to Ute Mountain. Havasupai people have been fighting uranium for over 40 years, and the Governor of Arizona is trying to stop it because the company is using an old Environmental Impact Statement. Renewable energy technology is killing our indigenous peoples' land through extraction of raw materials. In traditional lands of the Apache, Rio Intento intends to make a copper mine a mile long, a mile deep, and that's on a sacred site.

We're still fighting energy wars around hydrogen development, we're fighting pipelines, and we're also fighting "produced water." The Governor of New Mexico wants to use fracking water, treat it, and use it as new water, but it's not. It's a toxic soup of oil and radon. They want to reuse it for agriculture and for the fracking community.

Can you share some examples or strategies that are advancing environmental justice?

It's up to communities to start growing our own food now, finding ways to capture our own water. Privileged people can move to the safest places during climate change. We're not going to be able to depend on the federal government 30 years from now, so it's important that we plan now for 50 years, 100 years later.

Beyond that, there's not really much we can do except organize, organize, organize. Grassroots organizing is key; it's what has kept us alive. With Native communities, it's also about switching the narrative, to make it clear we are still here. You didn't exterminate us. That's powerful.

We worked with a coalition that stopped a hydrogen bill in New Mexico last year by mobilizing people at the State Capitol. The governor was putting in \$159 million for creating an Office of Hydrogen Development and contracts for hydrogen developers. We squashed that. There are about twelve organizations in our coalition using frontline community defense methods. When we engage, we make sure we are not harming, but when we're in decision makers' spaces, we say what has to be said.

Tell us more about your model. How do you sustain yourselves while doing grassroots work?

We're barely getting by. We got a small grant from Building Equity and Alignment to continue our work. Right now, we're getting sub-awards from the University of New Mexico on benefits and services for those 55 and over, including internet access. We're also trying to reframe our workforce titles to make them more adaptive to what we are actually dealing with. We changed the name of community health worker to social justice worker, and our health partner is called the health equity coordinator.

What keeps you in the fight? What are some hopes that you have for the future for a more environmentally just and healthy world?

We didn't ask for this, we're born into it ... and multiculturally, too. My mom worked with African American women, and they're the ones that helped mold her to be loud, and that rubbed off on me. The young people, that's the hope I really have. My son is a hip hop artist, known as Indigenize the World, and he's also working with Indigenous Lifeways. My daughter runs that, and if you check out the website, you'll see what gives me hope because she's doing a lot. We went with a group of young indigenous women that had the strength to speak and to help us deliver a letter of opposition to Blackstone, a \$1 trillion finance company that's funding hydrogen on our land.

That's what we do, direct action. It's still warfare, but we're doing it in a peaceful way.

Anna Rondon is Kinya'aa'aanii Clan and born for Nakai Dineh and whose grandparents are Tabaaha and Nakai Dine. She serves as Project Director at New Mexico Social Justice & Equity Institute, which works to change systems that perpetuate environmental and health disparities related to the impacts of institutional racism and multi-generational trauma. Anna is a dedicated lifetime advocate for the rights of Indigenous people. For the past 40 years, she has worked in various leadership positions, including for the Navajo Nation government, the Eastern Navajo Agency-Local Government Office, the Navajo Nation Chichiltah Chapter, and the Navajo Nation Department of Health.

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE: THE OUTSIZED IMPACT OF BUILDING PRODUCTS ON HEALTH AND EQUITY

GINA CIGANIK

In 2013, I became aware of a form of structural racism that shows up in community development but is not yet visible to most people working in the real estate sector.

I spent the first 20 years of my career working as a housing developer, creating or preserving thousands of affordable housing units. In addition to social justice issues, I was interested in environmental health, so I combined my two passions as I created housing that was affordable, high-performing, and healthy, while minimizing its impact on the Earth.

As I was developing an ultra-sustainable multi-family apartment called The Rose, I learned that the chemicals used to make building materials were linked to various diseases and health conditions. Cancer, autoimmune disorders, reproductive and infertility issues, and autism, are on the rise and part of a long, and growing list of health impacts. More and more scientific studies are finding hazardous chemical exposures a key concern.

Exposures to these chemicals not only impact building residents, but also affect the communities who work in or live near manufacturing facilities, workers who construct and maintain buildings, and communities who live near or work in recycling and waste collection. And these exposures and health harms disproportionately impact people of color, low-wealth communities, and children.

The community development field has long understood the significance of one's zip code on their health outcomes. Legacy and contemporary racist policies and practices have resulted in higher concentrations of people of color and low-wealth communities living in the most problematic and polluted zip codes.

What is less understood is that building products and chemicals are woefully and inadequately tested and regulated. When I was developing housing, I assumed these products were safe – that the government, and those manufacturing building materials, would protect our health. That is not the case. Because of this lack of rigor, and racist policies and practices, there are “sacrifice zone” communities that are home to large numbers of facilities and industries making polluting products which disproportionately bear the pollution burden. Most notable is an area in Louisiana called Cancer Alley, where Black and Brown people have higher incidence of cancer and other diseases due to the pollution caused by the supply chain that manufactures products, like vinyl flooring, carpet, insulation, and the list goes on. As a housing developer, I had no idea that the products I was specifying were devastating low-income communities across the United States.

Whether you know it or not, if you are engaged in constructing or maintaining buildings, you are part of a racist and unjust system that disproportionately harms the health of people of color, low-income communities, and children. It is an unintended contradiction in our values to build affordable housing that is meant to combat social inequity, with building materials that perpetuate legacy health harms and environmental injustices.

When I became aware of this issue, I could not look away. In 2015, I left my two-decade long affordable housing career to join [Habitable](#) (formerly, Healthy Building Network) in advancing health equity and environmental justice through advocacy and education that supports the selection of safer building products.

The good news is that the real estate field has the power to make a difference. Knowing how products rank can help developers and architects make informed decisions that reduce impacts of harmful chemicals on building occupants, workers, and communities that live near polluting manufacturing facilities. Funders and financing entities also have a key role to play in leading and shaping a future that underpins health, equity, and environmental justice.

Habitable's science team has created simple-to-use guidance to support safer product selection using a red (worst) to green (best) ranking. We call this initiative [Informed™](#), and it is freely accessible on our website.

Habitable assessed the content of building products specified across [36 affordable housing projects \(2,100 units\)](#). We found that 70% of products evaluated were amongst the worst (red and orange). This reality is not unique to affordable housing, as we see similar results across building typologies – offices, healthcare, schools, and more. However, affordable housing is uniquely positioned to change the system to one that is grounded in health equity and environmental justice. The most important first step you can take is to [step-up from red-ranked products](#).

The great news is that [leaders are already making positive changes](#) by using healthier products. There are better alternatives that meet cost and performance criteria. Check out the case study that highlights [First Community Housing's](#) success in using better materials in their modular apartment building. And, if you really want to be inspired, learn about the [Lower Sioux Indian Community](#) innovating building insulation by using hemp – not only a healthier alternative but one that is also creating green jobs and a new economic model for their community.

It's time. We have the knowledge, and we have the power to design a new system grounded in health and justice, leaving no person or place behind.

Now that you know, what will you do?

Gina Ciganik is the chief executive officer of [Habitable](#). She has been growing and scaling the organization's vision since assuming the role of CEO in 2016. Gina previously served as Senior Advisor for Housing Innovation, and prior to Habitable, she spent two decades creating thousands of healthy, affordable homes as the vice president of housing development at a Minneapolis–St. Paul area affordable housing organization.

“WHETHER YOU KNOW IT OR NOT, IF YOU ARE ... CONSTRUCTING OR MAINTAINING BUILDINGS, YOU ARE PART OF A RACIST AND UNJUST SYSTEM THAT DISPROPORTIONATELY HARMS THE HEALTH OF PEOPLE OF COLOR, LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES, AND CHILDREN.

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE: HOUSING CO-OPS AS SANCTUARIES FROM RACISM, FASCISM AND BIGOTRY IN AMERICA'S NEW NORMAL

ADRIAN ALBERTO MADRIZ

You're not typically one to draw arbitrary lines in the sand, but today was the straw that broke the camel's back. You wake up at an ungodly hour, screaming at the top of your lungs, YA! Basta de mamadas. Nothing in this country works anymore. So you pack your bags, and you decide you're going to D.C. to rake the U.S. government over the coals, and you're not coming back until they fix everything they've broken beyond repair.

You find yourself on the speaking floor addressing a joint session of congress. You give an impassioned speech, confident that you found the right combination of words that will melt the coldest of hearts, too compelling for even the most narcissistic to ignore. You figured out a way to shift funds in the federal budget away from war profiteering and corporate welfare, towards human investments that will actually save the country billions and start a new era of broad-based prosperity. This intervention will be the turning point of America's late stage capitalist Armageddon.

Then the vote happens. And except for a couple token voices of reason, the entire congress votes against your proposals. The dream is over before it begins.

Why does this dynamic continue to play itself out, not just nationally, but in every state and municipality across the country? Why is it so hard to convince governments to address systemic barriers, and so easy to pass bills that are the legislative equivalent of cancer?

Miami-based housing and climate organization, SMASH, has a theory: we simply haven't built enough power for the values of racial, gender, housing, and climate justice. As a result, the leadership and policies serve the values that do have enough power in this country: racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and inhumanity. These values control the institutions that provide opportunities for individual wealth building and will never give up enough wealth to achieve real equity, but will distribute just enough to prevent anyone from seriously considering class warfare. In order to challenge this status quo, we have to build superior institutions that reflect the values of justice. And we should start with the institution where people spend the most time (and money): their homes.

This theory of change guides SMASH's strategies for building power. SMASH creates community-controlled affordable housing cooperatives to provide housing for their organizers. Organizers build relationships with their neighbors, listening to them, training them, and inviting them to break bread together. Doing this once or twice won't counter the influence of all the other institutions in the neighbor's life, compelling them to vote for the leopards-eating-faces-party. But over time, with consistency and reliable presence, the seeds of transformation can take root. They have seen real trees grow from this process, leading to miracles of organizing and community power. In the last few years:

- Organizers convinced Governor Ron DeSantis to pass eviction moratoriums five times in 2020.
- In 2021, organizers defeated a proposal to turn historically Black beach, Virginia Key, into a homeless encampment.
- In 2022, protests over rent spikes resulted in 60-day notice periods for rent increases and additional rental assistance for rent increases over 20%.
- In 2023, organizers successfully pushed Miami-Dade County to create a community land trust pilot program with 50 vacant and publicly owned lots.

SMASH has taken this strategy even further. Every day, queer people are associated more and more with adult content and pedophilia, and poor people are treated more and more like the sore losers of a supposed meritocracy, and it becomes even easier to strip us of our humanity. There is a growing need for institutions that offer true sanctuary from these misplaced judgments. There are no silver bullets, but SMASH's co-ops function as shelter for unsheltered queer youth and residents threatened by climate gentrification, in which displacement risks are made more intense by the overvaluation of high-elevation and flood-resistant land in low-income areas. With continued engagement of neighbors on our values, these sanctuaries will hopefully become obsolete. However, that kind of change takes years. We have to be prepared for this marathon. Legislative fights constantly fluctuate between jubilation and heartbreak, but when our community controls land and housing, the institutions we build on them are permanent. They can't be legislated away, or voted away, or easily co-opted. We have to invest in the infrastructure that will sustain us and the work for the long-term. Creating sanctuaries that potentially build more sanctuaries is an effective way to do that.

In Miami-Dade County, SMASH hopes that building by building, neighborhood by neighborhood, and city by city, we can build a critical mass of support for the idea that housing is a human right. That's a tall order in a city that's never in the mood to build deeply affordable housing, but always in the mood to build an anti-communist monument for Bay of Pigs veterans. But SMASH has faith that if we stick with this commitment, we will get there. And then, instead of losing elections to felonious billionaire boot-lickers, and having to suffer through yet another legislative session of failed ideas, maybe our institutions will be so strong that this new normal we find ourselves in will be remembered for what it actually is: the temporary embarrassment that preceded our finest hour.

Adrian Alberto Madriz is a community organizer and a leader on the issues of gentrification, climate change, queer advocacy, racial equity, and affordable housing. He serves as Co-Executive Director of Struggle for Miami's Affordable and Sustainable Housing (SMASH), a community land trust building power for housing and climate justice in Miami. Adrian holds a bachelor's of arts from the University of Michigan. He lives with his husband in the Overtown neighborhood of Miami, FL.

“WHEN OUR COMMUNITY CONTROLS LAND AND HOUSING, THE INSTITUTIONS WE BUILD ON THEM ARE PERMANENT. THEY CAN'T BE LEGISLATED AWAY, OR VOTED AWAY, OR EASILY CO-OPTED. WE HAVE TO INVEST IN THE INFRASTRUCTURE THAT WILL SUSTAIN US AND THE WORK FOR THE LONG-TERM.



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ARTIST'S WORK:

BRIAN HERRERA

A future with anti-racist community development could center on accessibility in urban design, where walkable neighborhoods and abundant green spaces foster connection and health. Communities would thrive through easy access to essential resources, reducing systemic inequalities. Community-based gardens and urban farming initiatives would ensure that no area becomes a food desert, empowering residents to grow their own crops. This vision prioritizes equity, well-being, and sustainability, creating cities where everyone can flourish, regardless of race or background. Living in Chicago, I notice that a lot of people in low-income neighborhoods lack these spaces, I wanted to create something that resonates with residents in my city and beyond.

Born in Veracruz, Mexico and raised in the vibrant cultural landscape of Chicago, Brian Herrera emerged as a multifaceted artist blending illustration, design, and storytelling. His work delves into the complexities of immigrant identity, infusing his work with a passion for music and street art. The visual narratives experiment with a deep connection to his roots and a profound exploration of cultural themes. Herrera's recent recognition includes the Victor K. McElheny Award from MIT at Cambridge and the Knight Science Journalism program for his illustration work, further acknowledging his unique contributions to the intersection of art and science.

TESTING THE SOIL: WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Which scenario will it be? As the contributors to this issue reflected upon, the consequences of climate change are great. Yet each one also magnified the potential for new opportunities in a resilient future. If we're serious about fostering a more equitable future, we likely aren't going to take an individualistic or one-size-fits-all approach. We're going to think more collectively and communally, prioritizing those that have been made the most marginalized, honoring the unique expertise that we each can bring.

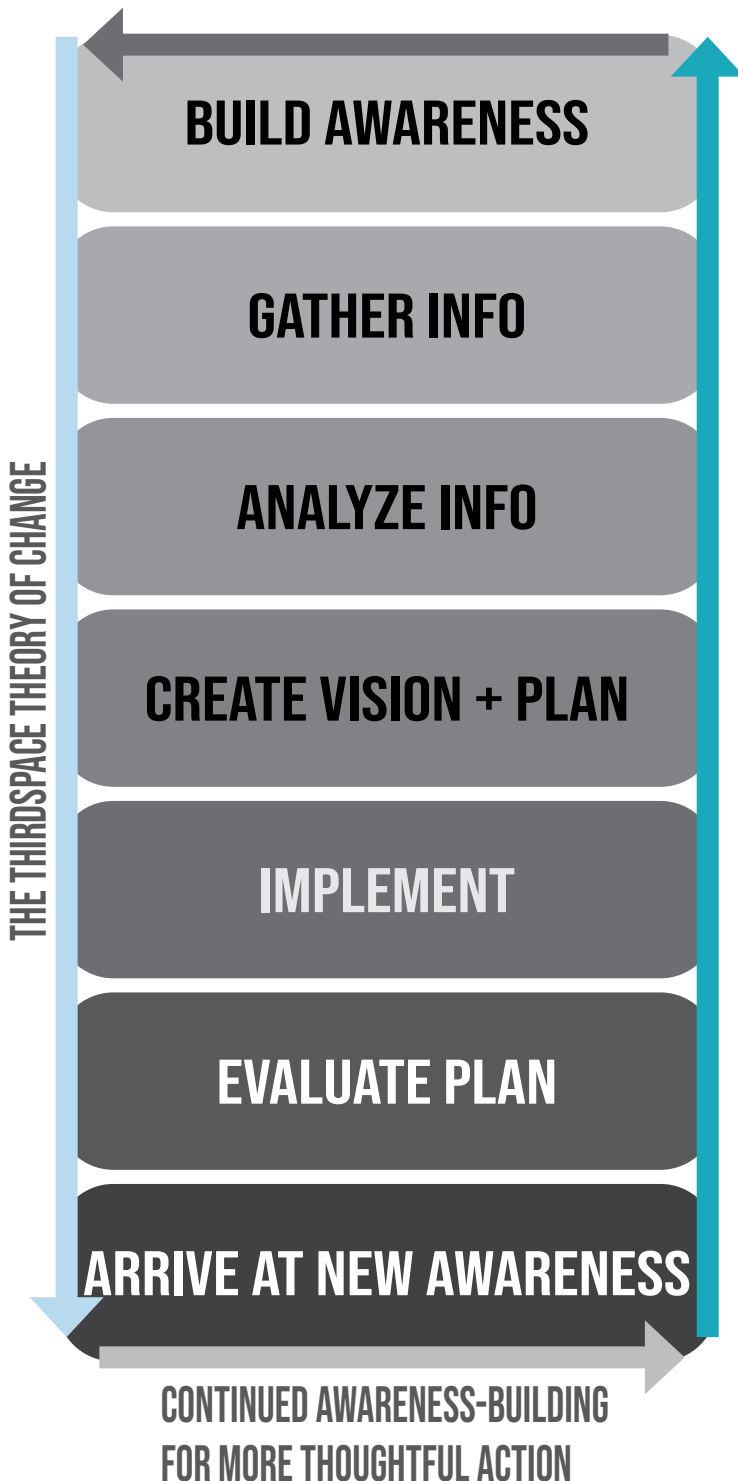
At ThirdSpace, we believe that building and sustaining anti-racist work is an ongoing feedback loop, in which we commit to a cycle of continued awareness building, which can lead to more thoughtful action. Addressing climate change in our communities is urgent, and yet it requires an intentional process to mitigate unintended consequences. After considering the reflections in this issue, here are a few offerings to foster a more sustainable future.

OFFERING 1: RECONNECT WITH NATURE.

Artist Benny Starr prompts us to remember to Breathe, to reconnect with our humanity and to honor nature. Take 90 seconds to listen to the piece and reflect on what Benny refers to as "the sacred connection between nature, creativity, and liberation." What does the piece bring up for you? Breathe through what you feel. Benny talks about traveling and recording this piece in a specific, meaningful location. Where can you go to reconnect with nature?

OFFERING 2: FIND YOUR PLACE IN THE ECOSYSTEM.

The ecosystem of community development includes many people and organizations, each with their own



part to play. Identify yourself in the community development ecosystem, and consider what role you play in shaping change. Whether you are a community organizer, policymaker, communicator, entrepreneur, or educator, each one of us plays a part in responding to climate change. The ecosystem also reinforces that none of us can do this work in isolation. Identify collaborators in other roles to map out your own anti-racist community development ecosystem.

OFFERING 3: ENVISION A NEW FUTURE.

At ThirdSpace, we believe that it is essential to lean into our radical imaginations, holding fast to a better world that we can work towards. Through The People's Practice, visual artists help us envision a future in which an anti-racist paradigm fosters our communities. They help us emphasize anti-racist narratives that counter the dominant narratives and mask the systemic barriers and root causes to the disproportionate impacts of climate change. We also love the collection from Grist, [Imagine 2200: Climate Fiction for Future Ancestors](#). These visions can help inspire new possibilities, and foster re-commitment for the path ahead.

OFFERING 4: EVOLVE WITH WHAT WORKS.

Looking to root your vision in practical next steps? We compiled a set of [Promising Practices at the Intersection of Environmental Justice and Racially Equitable Community Development](#) to help us think about what communities are already practicing that is working. We can look at a whole range of examples and consider what might be applicable to our work and our context. As you review this resource, can you think of some ways that you could incorporate some of these promising practices into your work? Next, set aside some time to work through the prompts in the [workbook](#). The worksheets will help you reflect (pp. 13-17), analyze your positionality in the work (pp. 18-20), and start to outline some next steps in an initial action plan (pp. 21-22). How will you engage with environmental justice to evolve your equitable community development work?

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