The People's Practice

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WHEN THE TRUTHS WE HOLD ARE NOT SELF-EVIDENT

ARTWORK BY KIM THÁI NGUYỄN

IT'S TIME TO LOOK BACK TO OUR ROOTS. To those so-called "Founding Fathers" who, when they penned those famed words, never intended equal rights for all people, nor even for all men. To the endowment of unalienable rights, meant only for landholders - wealthy, white men. To a past with which we have yet to reckon. And to generations of activists who, since that time over 200 years ago, have fought continuously for the expansion of rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It's time to take a hard look at the state of this democracy. To rights expanded in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and to the efforts to weaken it through restrictive voter laws over the last decade, disproportionately disenfranchising Black voters. In another presidential election year, we endure an onslaught of political pundit commentary, dramatic candidate advertisements, and arguments (or silent treatment) with impassioned folks on both sides of the aisle. We hash out the same conversations. Voters, not disengaged but disaffected. Civic engagement, relevant beyond once every four years.

In community development, what has been the role of democracy and democracy building? It's time for us to look back on our roots. It's time to reckon with the power of the people in community development's beginnings that many believe are rooted in the Black Power movement and Civil Rights movement. To its origin stories in tenant organizing. To the emphasis of community development as a vehicle for self-determination. To our elders who sat on bulldozers to protest the destruction of their homes and gardens for the freeways that would cut through our neighborhoods. To cross-racial solidarity paving the way for steps forward toward racial justice.

And yet, where is community development in this democracy? How has community development fostered or hindered democracy? Where do we see democracy building in government budgets, in development processes, in grantmaking, in collective decision making? In this issue, we hear from voices of democracy builders across the country who are wrestling with these questions every day.

Dive in with us to this conversation about the role of democracy building in anti-racist community development, and the role of community development in preserving our democracy. We invite you to review our High Level Research Findings and consider the impacts that community development leadership, finance, and policy have on democracy building. What could it look like to truly lift every voice, for all people to be considered equal, regardless of race, citizenship status, or income level? Imagine a world where innovative approaches pushed democracy forward, through new economic systems, through approaches to community building and planning, through community service and resident leadership.

Let's build our collective civic muscle together. Onward.

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ARTIST'S WORK:

JEREMY MATTHEW

Memphis, Tennessee-based multidisciplinary artist Jeremy Matthew has spent the last several years refining his skills in portraiture, both realism and abstraction. Fascinated not only by the lives that other people live but also by the simple fact that no two people are alike, Jeremy is compelled to explore the wonder and intimacy that lives within the stories of others.

This body of work responds to only a few of the issues that are rooted in the ubiquity of racism in the community development sector: a lack of funding for schools, housing segregation, and environmental racism. The narrative of all three pieces takes place within a redlined neighborhood, in a future with anti-racist community development.

EAST SIDE

An investment in housing developments in redlined neighborhoods; an increase in property value. As funding slowly returns to the community, access to essentials such as hospitals, grocery stores with fresh produce, and eventually public transportation increase. Slowly moving away from being considered a "disadvantaged community" by reducing the number of properties that sit empty, the fight against gentrification strengthens well. Since the primary way that Americans pay for public schools is by paying property taxes, an increase in property values means more funding for schools.

SAFETY HAZARD

A solution for the air pollution hazards in "sacrifice zones" that plague so many Black communities across America. These industrial plants cause property values to drop, perpetuating a cycle of disinvestment. Because many of these areas are low-income, their residents have less access to vital resources, such as education, healthcare, and, thanks to the smokestacks and industrial plants, even clean water and air. Raising a family in proximity to these industrial zones is obviously extremely unsafe, and I chose to highlight this by depicting a child being the one to interact with these dangers. To everyone's elation, he has effectively plugged every last smokestack pipe in the community so that nobody is affected by the polluted air anymore.

GRADUATION

A school receives an increase in funds, thus allowing its students access to facilities crucial for learning, an increase in pay for the teachers and faculty, as well as boosting the school's graduation rate. Having the proper tools to help a child become interested and invested in their education early on ensures that a school's students are well-equipped for their future.

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE:
SELECTIVE DEMOCRACY: THE THREE-FIFTHS APPROACH

DESIREE' POWELL

You've probably heard the phrase "for the people, by the people" used by activists, community organizers, or social justice movements. Or maybe in other dialogues and conversations about community issues, politics, and policies. As an urban planner focused on embedded practices, the meaning of those six words has defined the way I practice inside and out of communities, especially in communities that look like me. Me, being a Black, openly gay woman, working in a profession founded (and still predominantly dictated) by white men for white people and white communities through policies and political willpower. This same profession created redlining, racist zoning policies, and urban renewal or, modern-day Jim Crow. The same policies that would eventually ravage the fabric of Black communities, neighborhoods, and the essence of what community development means to Black people.

I often define community as the root of development. Intentional development that gathers all, engages all, and builds with all involved. That is built within the community, led by the community, trusted by the community. All of it done internally within the community, in turn, creating essential services and needs for a community to thrive. At its core, the development of an actual communal governance determines what is built, how, where, and its purpose. Actual city planning long before it was called"city planning." In a way, Black people developed communities led by their own sense of democracy aimed to provide the freedoms, rights, and representation of Black communities as a priority – not an afterthought. The same rights and freedoms that were not prioritized in the Constitution – created as the founding principles of what democracy would be in America. Freedoms and rights that were alleged as "power for the people" in having a voice in the way their lives are governed. Those same powers defined Black Americans as less than person. Three-fifths to be exact.

"THE MOST IMPACTFUL LESSONS CAME FROM FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEADERS WHO THEMSELVES WERE NEVER FORMALLY TRAINED OR HELD ANY PROFESSIONAL CREDENTIALS IN THIS SPACE."

The foundational framework of democracy in the U.S. has been built on (and continues to thrive from) systemic racism, classism, dehumanizing of those considered less than, and pure fear mongering. All of these have fostered negative long-term impacts that many Black communities have yet to recover from. There are few Black towns, cities, neighborhoods, and communities in existence today because of the by-products of "selective democracy" perpetuating systemic racism through policy. As a result, there are not many of those Black communities left. There are no efforts for development or hope for development in those Black communities. Community development at the core reason of establishing Black communities as a space of refuge has been destroyed. There are no elements of a trusted community governance to guide us, protect us, or give us a sliver of hope. A polar opposite representation of what is modeled as the exemplary standard of a people powered democratic government. However, hope has not been lost – it simply needs genuine reviving.

I'd like to believe that my purpose in pursuing this profession was to play a role in that revival of hope. Belief in community development in Black communities that is rooted in embedded city planning. Belief that those early Black towns and settlements cultivated city planning that worked for us. Now, instead of using "for the people, by the people," it's FOR THE PEOPLE, WITH THE PEOPLE. Because without us, there is no community.

Desiree' "Dee" Powell is an embedded urban planner focusing on projects driven towards economic mobility and community sustainability in Black communities. She is also the founder of the planning firm, Do Right By The Streets (DRBTS). Her inspiration in this space comes from the beauty of Black culture through music, activism, and Black migration.

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE:
NATIONAL SERVICE AS A VEHICLE FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

JENNIFER O. LESHNOWER

We know that where we live is inextricably linked to our health and wellbeing. I find cautious comfort in the idea that America is an *ongoing experiment*, with democracy's boundaries, its weaknesses and potential, its promises and failures. And similar to life saving, disease-curing experiments in medicine, the seriousness with which we test democracy can't be understated – nor can our belief that democracy can realize equitable outcomes for individuals, the United States, and global citizenship. My personal affinity towards democracy has evolved over time, from an unencumbered,observational notion to something more fully nuanced and critiqued. I rigorously engage with democracy daily. For me, joining AmeriCorps was an intentional choice to seek out and build a more just democracy in 2001, and continues today, as the Agency's first Bridging & Democracy Fellow.

Immediately after college I was a Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA), where I developed my skills, perspective, and confidence. I organized after school mentoring and tutoring programs in a middle school in Wilmington, Delaware with a cross-section of Title I students from city-center and suburban neighborhoods. VISTA was a constant teacher, gifting me with the experiences, knowledge, and practice to be a role model to middle school-aged students, a community organizer, a project manager for grant-funded school programs, and a colleague to first-year and veteran educators alike.

AmeriCorps emboldened my passion for activation and participation. I found something motivating and promising when individuals, operating within and beyond the constraints of systems and structures, sought something better. AmeriCorps nurtured a values-orientation and discipline for ongoing curiosity, perseverance, and deep desire to challenge the status quo. Whether members are mentoring school-aged children, rebuilding post-disaster, strengthening public health and affordable housing access, serving hot meals, planting community gardens, or reconnecting with isolated community members, I believe AmeriCorps is a reflection of what democracy – at its best – can offer.

The AmeriCorps I knew and loved as a member has evolved through innovation, experimentation, and requisite improvement. Much like democracy, AmeriCorps is an evolving, ever improving organism. Thirty years ago, AmeriCorps started in just over 1,000 communities with 20,000 Americans who believed they could offer the best of themselves towards improving the lives of others, and by extension, strengthen their country. Currently over 200,000 people serve as AmeriCorps members or AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in 40,000 locations across all 50 states and territories. But quantity is not the measure of progress. The truest sign of progress is that AmeriCorps remains mission-focused while also reducing barriers to service and promoting equity to enhance the service year experience. Strengthening and increasing pathways to education and

employment and increasing members' living allowance demonstrate the ongoing commitment to ensure national service is a vehicle for more people to be deeply engaged in the great democratic experiment.

AmeriCorps consistently asks its members to center the lived experience of community members closest to the pain, to be solution finders, to be truth tellers, to be co-creators of the just world we all deserve in our lifetimes.

As AmeriCorps' Bridging & Democracy Fellow, I build relationships across public, private, academic, and philanthropic partners to share and deepen our collective knowledge around civic bridge-building within national service. I look for collaborative opportunities to enhance skills, confidence, and aptitude of service members to practice intentional bridge-building in their communities. To intentionally seek out diverse perspectives, to build trust and be in relationship with individuals who live and think differently, and to ultimately uphold their humanity while building shared solutions to today's most pressing social challenges. AmeriCorps and the vast network of community-based organizations, national nonprofits, faith-based organizations, public schools, parks, food banks, and libraries where members serve are connected to this greater calling. Surrounded by cultural and political dissonance and disillusionment, AmeriCorps members are uniquely positioned to bring people together in the name of something larger than themselves.

As I look around at the impressive cohort of current AmeriCorps members and volunteers, my faith in democracy is renewed because I see people of every age, race, religion, region, and creed decide that justice, equity, and equality come from sharing the responsibility and effort to build a better country for all. They join 1.3 million alumni who have also answered the call to serve.

For me, national and public service has been an avenue for me to hone my practice and belief in participatory democracy, to co-create community spaces and opportunities where all people can thrive. Service has been and continues to be a shared experiment alongside democracy, to get to justice and racial equity.

Jennifer O. Leshnower is an AmeriCorps VISTA Alum (2001) and Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (2009). For over two decades, Jen has worked at the nexus of community development, volunteerism, and organizational capacity strengthening with a variety of local affiliates, national nonprofits, and more recently, state government. She is currently a Federal Fellow with the STEM NEXT Opportunity Fund, placed at AmeriCorps. Jen has a master's in social work and master's in public administration from Columbia University and a bachelor's in political science from William Smith College.

"AMERICA IS AN ONGOING EXPERIMENT, WITH DEMOCRACY'S BOUNDARIES, ITS WEAKNESSES AND POTENTIAL, ITS PROMISES AND FAILURES. AND SIMILAR TO LIFE SAVING, DISEASE-CURING EXPERIMENTS IN MEDICINE, THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH WE TEST DEMOCRACY CAN'T BE UNDERSTATED."

NOURISHING EQUITABLE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

AN IN(TER)VIEW WITH ERIKA ANTHONY

We caught up with Erika Anthony to discuss democracy building beyond election cycles and fostering an equitable civic ecosystem.

What do you believe that equitable civic engagement means, or what does it mean to you?

Erika: I credit the Kirwan Institute for its Equitable Civic Engagement report that distinguished between engaging community in a performative, surface level way versus building deep trust and relationship with community. It gave us the vernacular to hold ourselves accountable to our practices. Listen to those most proximate to the challenge, seek solutions from them. I have made a concerted effort to establish relationships in different facets of Cleveland's communities, but I also recognize that our lived experiences are different. For that reason, we identify partners who can speak to their communities' needs, and our role is to provide the tools and resources they need to do their jobs most effectively. There are urgent needs before us, but we have to go at the pace of community. My intention is not to necessarily lead all things related to democracy, but instead ensure we listen deeply to understand how, together, we can create solutions.

Could you speak more to building partnerships, and how we can practice a stronger cross racial solidarity, especially as Black leaders in civic engagement?

Erika: There is a deep commitment within our community to speak truth to power and reconcile with the tensions we see within the city. For some community members, the long legacy in Cleveland's community development infrastructure works, and for others, not so much. Part of building relationships was naming the truths we heard. We facilitated conversations around a mobile exhibit, "Undesign the Redline." It was a launchpad to have real conversations about how our neighborhoods look. It's not by chance. It's by design.

Another example was during the 2020 Census, a concern around potential citizenship questions. We had to say, we don't know. You have to make your own decision. We couched it to consider ramifications of less resources for our community without an accurate count. That's part of how we've been able to build relationships – creating authentic spaces where folks can learn. And we also learn from them.

Also, our region does have a tremendous amount of "resources," but often we're not working systematically together. It's important for us to stay clear on our mission. But so many outside factors want to pull us in other directions. We are not doing on the ground canvassing, voter registration, because folks are already doing that. Our priority is strengthening the civic infrastructure. Nevertheless, people who don't know the granular nature of our work ask about our number of voter registrations. But our work is not just about "the goal of the election," and that's hard to say both to funders and community. If folks are not seeing metrics like voter turnout shift, there's a perception of failure. Feeling that pressure is real because the voter turnout is not increasing.

We are seeing the civic ecosystem grow. There is always that internal tension, are we doing enough? But to actually see equitable civic engagement, that's not something that just happens. You have to nourish it, like any living organism.

You're creating better systems, and that is harder to talk about. Could you speak a little bit more about your newer programs, Democracy Collective, and More Than My Art?

Erika: In our organization's first strategic plan in 2022, partners responded, the DNA of Cleveland VOTES is beautiful and transformative. More people need to be part of it. We translated that as, how could we embed ourselves throughout our community?

We have leaders in our community. We don't lack brilliance or ingenuity. However, there's not a common hymn book. If you are a doctor or accountant, there's some uniformity to your training. Community work is more abstract. Folks may come to it as a result of a crisis, not necessarily with a plan of how they will address it. There's nothing wrong with that. But the Democracy Collective provides community leaders the main tenets of community building. Fellows create an activation project that speaks to their priorities. It's hard to translate theory into practice, but doing the activation projects during the program helps to troubleshoot in real time. We also pay participants. Where's the equity in this hierarchical understanding of who deserves compensation or not? We wanted to invest in leaders not only through time, but also through compensation, especially regarding deep, systemic work.

Through More Than My Art, we are building a more holistic relationship with and providing tangible tools for creatives and culture bearers. I wanted to expand our network to folks that aren't involved in the same way as me but have a vested interest because they are critical members of our community. We are co-creating solutions, not limiting creatives to an identity. Folks are more than being a visual artist, sculptor, poet. They are a whole human. An artist once said to me, "Don't look at us artists as a utility, or just call us when you want the mural. Invite us to the table to create with you." It's not just about the output.

This grounding quote from bell hooks is our other growing edge. "The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is; it's to imagine what is possible." I think we're doing great work. But if we think it's all figured out, how can we grow? Part of that is inviting others to push our imaginations in ways that we never could envision.

Some of these programs are helping to shift power. What does it look like to shift power? And what could this mean for shaping democracy in our future?

Erika: Everyone plays a role in the landscape of our democracy. Shifting power is expanding imaginations beyond voter turnout. Elections happen twice a year. People fly into a community a week before an election, they'll have a concert, but what's the lasting legacy of that? You have the financial means to do something. What are you leaving behind? We're asking people to consider the ways democracy shows up in our lives every day, year round.

In 2020, a bunch of us felt like the powers that be were not effectively ensuring that Black and brown communities had masks and PPE. We said, "We're gonna use the power we have. We're gonna fundraise. We're gonna get people what they need to be safe and healthy." That became Masks for Community, a kit that included information about the Census, COVID safety, voter engagement. It was an acknowledgement that we understood the election and Census was important for us as an organization, but we would be woefully disrespectful if we didn't understand the global health crisis unfolding before our eyes.

Some may say, how does that fall into democracy, or our mission? Because we're part of community, and we have to acknowledge all conditions of community. We could not do our work without making sure that we were protecting the health of our community first. That's part of the mix to create this more equitable democracy. Having a healthy community requires a healthy democracy.

Erika L. Anthony, a native New Yorker, is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Cleveland VOTES. Cleveland VOTES is a nonpartisan, democracy-building movement that works to reconstruct and strengthen power through active participation of our collective partners. Erika holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from The Pennsylvania State University and a master's of public administration from Cleveland State University.

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE:
A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL?

JEREMY GREER AND SOLANA RICE

Racism is profitable: an inconvenient and uncomfortable truth. Since the first settlers landed on these shores, corporations, and the people that control them, have used the existence of racism to enhance their wealth to the detriment of Black and Brown people and communities. Racism as a mechanism for profit is responsible for every single economic "gap" (such as the wage gap, wealth gap, the ownership gap) that plagues communities of color. The financial services industry has always known this; hence their role in capitalizing slave plantations, redlining Black and Brown communities, the aggressive marketing of subprime mortgages to people of color and more.

The Oppression Economy is a vicious cycle. Using tools of theft, exclusion, and exploitation in the pursuit of building wealth and accumulating power, these elites build, consolidate, and exert their political influence to maintain the status quo. This perpetuates a relentless cycle of oppression that suppresses the economic vitality of people of color, undermines our political power, and obstructs our ability to leverage democracy to change the economic rules that make racism profitable.

You may think, "Whoa, not in the community development sector. We're here to create jobs, economic development, housing, and build thriving communities." Yes, community development organizations deliver benefits because of cozy relationships with the financial services sector. However, the question remains – has this deal with the devil been worth it? Could more have been accomplished if our efforts had focused on aggressively curbing the influence, power, and control that banks and financial institutions have over people and communities of color?

This year marks 47 years since President Carter signed into law the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) as a way to ensure that banks were making loans and providing credit to Black and Brown communities they were not previously serving. Despite its intentions to combat racial discrimination in lending, many activities, such as speculative real estate, predatory lending, or investments in gentrifying businesses, have both undermined the economic vitality of communities of color and generated positive CRA ratings when these activities are situated in low-income communities. We support the National Community Reinvestment Coalition's (NCRC) call to create racial lending thresholds as a key criterion for CRA examinations and impose significant penalties to financial institutions whose actions harmed communities of color. As suggested by Randell Leach, the head of Beneficial State Bank, a community development bank, this can be accomplished, in part, by updating CRA guidelines to downgrade a bank's CRA rating by two levels for certain violations.

The CRA is one tool of many needing major reforms. In Liberation in a Generation's recent report, From Big Business to a Liberation Economy, we call on the federal regulators of financial institutions (such as the Federal Reserve, the Treasury, the Comptroller of the Currency, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) to require financial institutions to explicitly

center the needs of people of color. For example, financial institutions should begin to collect data and demonstrate the impact (good or bad) that their activities have on people and communities of color.

The vast majority of dollars circulating in our national economy runs through private banks and financial institutions. This means that financial institutions have tremendous control over both housing supply, business loans, public sector investments in infrastructure, and consumers' retail banking needs. Put simply, the federal government has effectively outsourced the distribution of the money supply to private financial institutions.

In a Liberation Economy, we need public banks to both serve the retail needs of Black and Brown people, but also to fulfill the community development needs of insuring, bonding, and financing basic needs like affordable housing, clean energy, and infrastructure. You can join the many advocates looking to create a public banking system that calls for the Federal Reserve to become more of a "people's bank" by providing every U.S. citizen (and undocumented citizen) with a Federal Reserve checking or savings account, while also providing a public, more democratically controlled institution that meets the needs of communities of color.

We can no longer stand for the existence of an Oppression Economy where racism is profitable. We must work to build a Liberation Economy where people of color have their basic needs met, are safe and secure, are valued, and feel we belong. The community development sector, through its intimate relationship with financial institutions, has a responsibility to hold banks accountable to creating that future. Our current deal with the devil will not suffice.

"WE CAN NO LONGER STAND FOR THE EXISTENCE OF AN OPPRESSION ECONOMY WHERE RACISM IS PROFITABLE. WE MUST WORK TO BUILD A LIBERATION ECONOMY WHERE PEOPLE OF COLOR HAVE THEIR BASIC NEEDS MET, ARE SAFE AND SECURE, ARE VALUED, AND FEEL WE BELONG."

Jeremie Greer and Solana Rice are Co-Executive Directors and co-founders of Liberation in a Generation, a national movement support organization building the power of people of color to totally transform the economy – who controls it, how it works, and most importantly, for whom. Both Jeremie and Solana have midwestern roots and careers in community development in cities across the country.

PERSPECTIVES IN PLACE:
GOVERNMENT IS THE PRIZE

CURTIS MINTER, JR.

As a Black boy raised in my grandmother's home on the westside of Akron, Ohio, we weren't regularly talking about political ideologies or radical centrism. I saw no correlation between my mother working 12-hour shifts in hopes of becoming a first-generation homeowner and the City Planning Committee's approval of a multimillion-dollar market-rate development with a 15-year tax abatement just around the corner. I don't come from a lineage of public servants nor was I a political science major. My relationship to democracy was a far-fetched idea existing somewhere out there in the ether and, by perception, had no bearing on my future.

Not until I moved to Denver, Colorado and encountered a Black elected official did I learn why and how I might be civically engaged. He spoke to politics being a gray space and argued our Blackness should inform our participation. Discerning my naivety, he challenged me to read W.E.B. Du Bois' op-ed titled "I Won't Vote." In doing so, I discovered Du Bois' position on voting was not the central theme. Please, please go vote. Du Bois' position was determined by his relentless effort to understand a nominees' "attitude toward Negroes," suggesting he was more than just a vote.

His dogged advocacy for Black people in America steadied his hand at the polls because every ballot has consequences. In a moment of revelation, I too understood my participation in the democratic process determined the material conditions of my life experience – and my community.

All of this was put to the test when I became a community based development practitioner nearly eight years ago. Year in and year out, the "downtrodden" neighborhood I served had one of the lowest turnouts in all of the 50+ voting sites across the city whereas the "affluent" neighborhood across town showed up in droves because of a nominal increase in their property taxes. It was a clear indication that the folks I served, like me, did not see themselves as stewards, forcing me to reckon with my role as a practitioner. Having participated in a number of discussions on how we might empower and encourage resilience amongst neighbors, it became increasingly clear we failed to take inventory of the resident's veiled potential. Don't get me wrong, leaning into the "sticks and bricks" of community development is good work. In the words of Major Carter, "we shouldn't have to move out of our neighborhood to live in a better one." But if it's our intention to create systemic change, we have an obligation to cultivate collective power and demonstrate, by design, government bends to our will.

So where do we go from here? In a world so Martin Luther King-less, we must continuously proclaim from the mountain tops that all power remains with the people, and we have a moral obligation to one another. Moreover, we must recognize one cannot seize power without information. For far too long, the established order has bastardized organizing and political mobilization as integral components of community based development. We as practitioners must fundamentally understand our missional efforts will not safeguard the people we serve from the politics of the day. In the words of Ray Greene, Jr. of The Freedom BLOC, dare we dream of a day where we all see government as the prize.

Curtis Minter, Jr. serves as Senior Fellow, Community of Practice + Convenings of The People's Practice at ThirdSpace Action Lab. As an Akron native with more than a decade of experience in nonprofit management, he previously served as Operations Director of The Well Community Development Corporation serving the Middlebury neighborhood until 2023.

"BUT IF IT'S OUR INTENTION TO CREATE SYSTEMIC CHANGE, WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO CULTIVATE COLLECTIVE POWER AND DEMONSTRATE, BY DESIGN, GOVERNMENT BENDS TO OUR WILL."

REINTRODUCING RURAL AMERICA: PLACES OF POSSIBILITIES

IN(TER)VIEW WITH STEPHANIE JOHNSON

We chatted with **Stephanie Johnson** about (mis)conceptions about rural America, cross-cultural coalition building, and philanthropic approaches to supporting organizing in rural communities.

Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got into your work?

Stephanie: From a young age, I was curious about racial identity. My father is white and American, and my mom is African, Indian, and French Creole. I grew up with this multiracial family in a rural community and saw how my mom was treated differently than me and my dad. In college, I wanted to explore racial dynamics further through the Race Dialogue Project, where we tried to push the conversation forward on topics like race, ethnicity, language, identity, and culture. When I got into philanthropy, I wanted to continue this kind of work. At the Kresge Foundation, one of my roles was working with a senior team of leaders on our DEI process, embedding racial equity into our strategies and learning. Now at Rural Democracy Initiative (RDI), I help to lead our racial justice planning process and how that shows up in all of our work from grantmaking to capacity building, to our grants management, internal operations, and hiring process.

The other thread was working in startups and social enterprises, before transitioning to philanthropy. This idea of businesses advancing social, cultural, and environmental issues attracted me, but I quickly found out that organizations still have to make a profit and make hard choices. The social good side of business gets deprioritized for profit. I wanted to find something where I went to bed and woke up thinking only about how to make social change. That's how I found philanthropy. It has challenges, but I'm grateful I found a place that reflects where I grew up, and is lifting up people fighting to change things in small towns and rural communities across the country.

At RDI, you invest in organizing in rural communities. What is your approach and strategy?

Stephanie: Rural communities have been disinvested in for decades by philanthropy, private industries, business, and government, and this has led to system degradation, from transit and rural hospital closures, to stagnant wages and lack of job opportunities. The only way for communities to change the conditions in which they live is to organize. To bring together folks from different backgrounds and figure out what they most want to work on.

"OUR CURRENT MISSION IS TO ELIMINATE HEALTHCARE DISPARITIES HOLISTICALLY THROUGH THE PROMOTION OF CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION."

As funders, we're not determinative. We give general operating support, and we let grantees figure out what's most important to their communities to organize around – keeping an elder care center open or improvements in manufactured housing. Right now, our network is excited about the possibilities from the Inflation Reduction Act – whether that's for solar on businesses or houses, electrifying school buses, or whole home repairs.

There's a million things people want to work on, but we should let those communities decide. Organizing in tandem with civic engagement can create that big change that we want to see in the world. It's working on the issues you care about, and it's using what we all have – our power to vote.

Can you share some trends you're seeing in terms of rural democracy across the country?

Stephanie: On the positive side, we've seen an explosion of organizations working in rural communities in the civic engagement ecosystem. Many are homegrown, a couple of people that really care about where they live. Statewide organizations have started to add rural chapters and organizers to their work, realizing that you can't truly have statewide power without including rural communities.

On the other side, we're also facing the rise in authoritarianism and white supremacy, though it's not new. Rural communities take the brunt of those trends. We've had grantees host events and the Proud Boys or militia show up with guns to their events. Some BIPOC leaders, especially around elections, have to relocate given threats to their safety. We support our groups to weather those storms through capacity building, security training, or rapid response contributions with no grant report or application. We let people decide what will make them feel safe. We also support through healing justice. We partner with Wild Seed, a network of mental health and spiritual practitioners helping people deal with aftereffects of a crisis.

Another trend – one in four people in rural America are people of color, an increase from the last census. In some rural communities, BIPOC folks are the majority, like in southwest Georgia, South Texas, rural Alaska. We've seen more multiracial coalition building. One of our grantees, Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), works with white, rural communities to shift their understanding, and show up in the movement in solidarity with Black and Latin/a coalitions in Georgia, North Carolina, Ohio, and Kentucky to deliver change. When white rural communities show up to these multiracial coalitions, it's important to ask, what role should we be playing? To listen and see where they can add value. When you break down the differences, folks want the same things. A coalition in Michigan developed a People Power Agenda to identify priorities, and folks wanted a better cost of living, increased wages, and clean water. Anti-racist work includes moving white rural communities in solidarity with communities of color, to further support multiracial coalition building. I'm hoping this trend will continue in rural America. I'm excited for it.

You started to touch on some of the misconceptions and false narratives about rural America. What are others? What is an alternative narrative that you'd like to put forward?

Stephanie: It is not true that rural America is only white folks. Another stereotype is around perceived progressiveness. We found that the majority of rural communities support abortion access and broad economic policies, increased minimum wage, better health care. They're anti-monopoly. They want corporations to pay their fair share of taxes.

Rural is not a monolith, not with race or age. Rural young people are the most potentially progressive folks on issues around climate, abortion access, gun violence. They want changes. But research shows they're actually the least contacted of any group. Rural young people are this huge missed opportunity; they're the most swingable and persuadable.

But rural people in general are very swingable. Across midterm and presidential elections, we've seen rural people swing quite a bit. Twenty years ago, a lot of rural people in unions voted very blue. There's misinformation about who rural people are, what they care about, who they vote for, and how they think, but again, they're not a monolith.

There is a rural culture. Community development talks in "a very highfalutin way," as my dad would say. You just need to talk to people and ask what they care about. Spend time with people, digging deeper, asking questions, being open to listening, and sharing your own story. This deep canvassing can really build a base of people to take on bigger challenges together. Rural folks have outsized political power. To make a difference in any state legislature, you need rural folks to be a part of your coalition.

Are there any closing thoughts you have for anti-racist community development practitioners?

Stephanie: Figure out how community development can work in partnership with civic engagement organizations. We have great organizations focused on community development, or on civic and voter engagement. There are some groups bridging the two; with issue organizing, doing projects in their communities, and engaging voters. But we don't have those amazing groups in every community. I'd challenge community development practitioners to know who else is organizing in their community for the long term. Figure out which organizations and individuals hold your same values. Civic engagement organizations do power mapping really well and know how to make change in their communities. Be in partnership and in coalition with these groups. What could you all accomplish together?

Stephanie Johnson is the Program Officer at the Rural Democracy Initiative – which includes the Heartland Fund (501c3) and Rural Victory Fund (501c4). RDI is a funder collaborative building civic and political power in rural communities across the U.S. Previously, Stephanie worked at NEO Philanthropy, a national funder intermediary and the Kresge Foundation, a national foundation based in Detroit. Stephanie grew up on a farm outside of the small town of Denton, Maryland and is passionate about making change for rural communities.

ARTIST'S WORK:
KIM THAI NGUYEN

Kim Thái Nguyễn is an artist and illustrator currently living in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her illustrations usually involve characters, delicate lines, and bright colors. When she's not drawing for others, she's exploring her interests, identity, and culture (as a child of Vietnamese immigrants) through personal art and zines.

TODAY'S YOUNG LEADERS ARE CREATING A BETTER TOMORROW

KIERSTEN IWAI

We sat down with **Kiersten Iwai** to discuss building political power among youth leaders.

Could you share with us a little bit about your work in youth civic engagement? What is something that excites you about the work you do?

Kiersten: I run Forward Montana, a multi-entity, civic engagement organization that is building the civic and political power of young people across the state. We empower young leaders, not just of tomorrow, but also of today. I'm really excited that young Montanans are pushing the boundaries for what is possible in a rural, conservative leaning state. Young people have a vision for the world that is so much more expansive than what we have now. That's beautiful. They're always pushing me to strive for that better vision. Every single day when the world seems hard, I know these incredible young leaders are organizing and fighting for a better future. That gives me a lot of hope.

What are some ways that you have grown from the youth that you interact with?

Kiersten: We are young person-led, and that is reflective in our team and our board. It's our own lived experiences and what we want to see. Increasingly, young people see the problems of the world as very interconnected, and therefore the solutions as intertwined. I have been pushed to ensure our work is reflective of this.

Policy wins aren't the only thing. While they lead to tangible outcomes that we want to see, the political realities of our state means they can be hard to achieve. Young people push us to think about how we can redefine success. How can we think about winning in other ways? It's about the local wins, the relationships that are formed, the lessons learned, and empowering more people speaking out on an issue. One of our former staff just got appointed to the city commission, a really huge win for young people!

What are some strategies you would like to lift up about rural organizing and bridging the gap between geographic locations?

Kiersten: I'm heartened to hear that rural organizing is being talked about more. When it's left out of the conversation, it makes people invisible, people who have an outsized impact on our elections. Rural people often get lumped into one type of person, white and conservative. That perception is not the reality. Rural people are also people of color. They are queer, trans, nonbinary, young, and old. I see the truth every day from my own team and our communities.

Rural organizing does look different. I often receive requests from national organizations who ask us to try a different platform, tool, or strategy. It doesn't work for us, because of distance or lack of internet or cell phone service. Mail is still a very important tool for us, but it's slower. If I mail something in the town that I live in, one of the larger cities in Montana, my mail goes to another town 140 miles away, and then it comes back to the same city.

Rural organizing is really personal. We have a lot of land and not a lot of people, but that doesn't mean that people aren't connected to each other. It's quite the opposite; people know each other, even if they live two hours away. We call Montana one small town with really long roads. That means you have to have really relational conversations. You have to talk to people who do not always align with your beliefs. Through those conversations, you learn there are core common values – like a deep sense of place and love for our state. But it takes time to get there. There's a

strong, healthy skepticism for ideas that are not necessarily from the state.

What does it look like to be really relational with people? Sometimes politics can be so impersonal.

Kiersten: Always showing up, being in those spaces. People notice. Being really empathetic. The world is really hard, and leaders, whether elected or not, dismiss the concerns of young people, or tokenize them. That has made politics really uninviting. We lean into empathy: I understand, I am also frustrated, and we can have a conversation around it. When we share a little bit of ourselves, show vulnerability, then we can connect with that person.

Politics is not known for being fun, but we make it fun! I personally love knocking on doors, but it can be intimidating. When we're phone banking, canvassing, tabling, we have scavenger hunts, bingo, fun games to make it not so serious. We make fun of the things that normal people would make fun of. We create a fun environment that you can be a part of.

You mentioned politicians and communities often dismiss the voices of young people. How can we make sure that youth voices are heard and have a political home?

Kiersten: We try to create that political home here at Forward Montana. We know that when people feel connected to each other, they feel connected to their community and are inspired to get involved and take action. We host events that are unrelated to voting or civic engagement, just to bring people together. We had an event about mending clothes, a watercolor paint night, and made bee boxes. From this we hope to identify people to become members or volunteers. Who is the next leader of that community? When we can create that for ourselves, we can model what that can look like elsewhere.

We also provide political education and opportunities for young people to engage. We offer trainings on telling your story and giving compelling testimony, so that a young person feels more empowered and confident to do so. One of the biggest compliments that I've ever received was from this mayor who told me, I have noticed a significant shift in the testimony that young renters have been telling us, and it compelled myself and the city council to pause and listen more. That was because we had worked on public comment training with these young renters.

"YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A VISION FOR THE WORLD THAT IS SO MUCH MORE EXPANSIVE THAN WHAT WE HAVE NOW. EVERY SINGLE DAY WHEN THE WORLD SEEMS HARD, I KNOW THESE INCREDIBLE YOUNG LEADERS ARE ORGANIZING AND FIGHTING FOR A BETTER FUTURE."

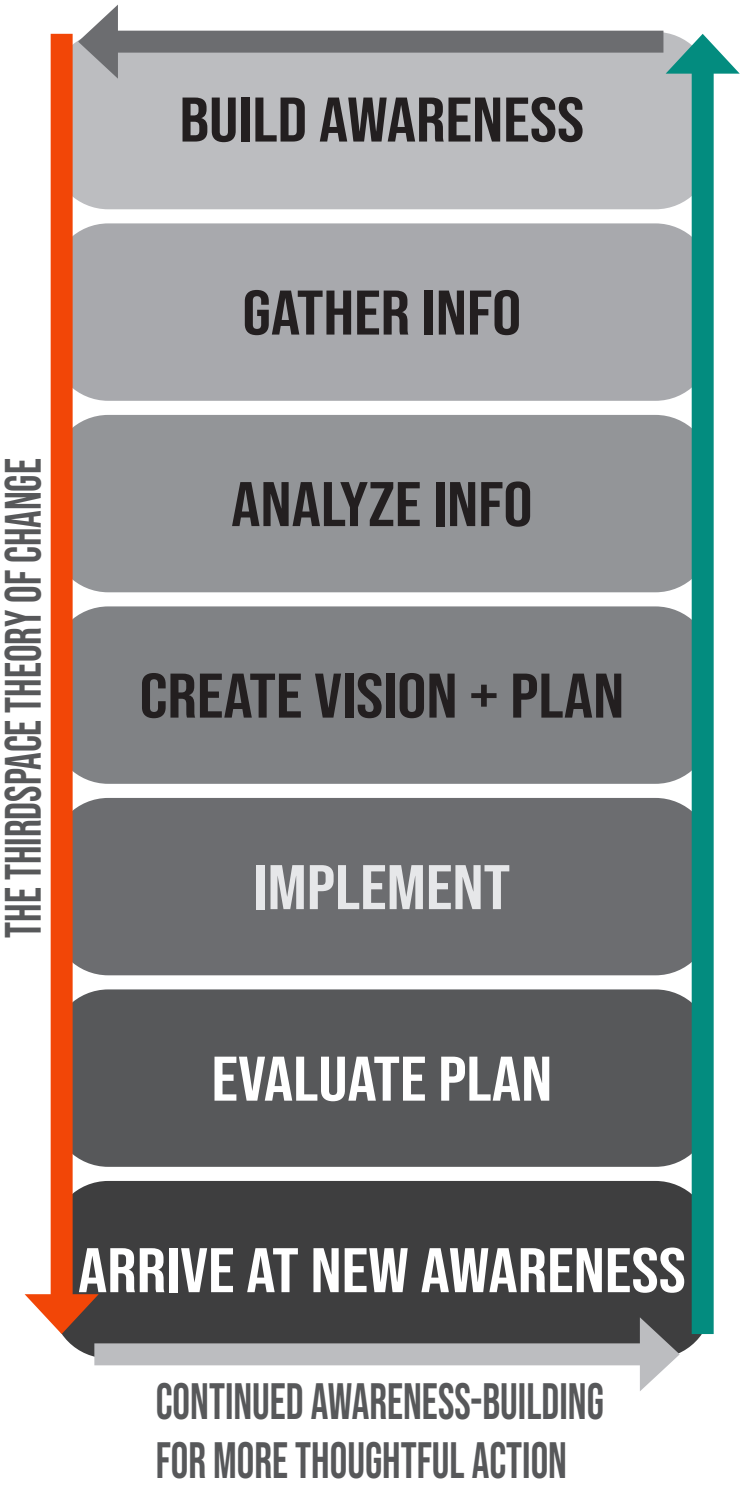
What does it mean for you for a community to have or to develop power?

Kiersten: Ideally, policies reflect the vision and values that the community wants and desires. Leaders are talking about those issues and the solutions using similar narrative and language as the people. It looks like this: legislators being courageous and standing up for what they believe in, because they have the support of young people, even if it is against the grain. A former intern is now a Republican legislator and stood up against horrible anti-trans legislation, going against her party. She took a big risk and has suffered dearly for it, but she stood up for what she thought was right.

It's so easy to feel alone in a state where towns are really tiny. Power also looks like people feeling less alone and more connected. We're creating a space where young people can believe in their home and in Montana. When given the chance, young people can do incredible things.

Kiersten Iwai (she/her) has spent her career advocating for the environment and young people's access to civic education in the mountain west. Today you'll find her leading and growing Forward Montana, a statewide organization that makes civic engagement and voting more accessible to young Montanans through education, grassroots organizing, and leadership development.

EXERCISE YOUR RIGHTS:
WHAT DO I DO NOW?



That's the state of our democracy as it relates to community development. We know if we don't address the consequences of segregation, it's going to be difficult to address the fundamental steps to preserving democracy, from building social capital across communities of different backgrounds to fighting gerrymandering or legislative representation. And we know that a healthy democracy requires a healthy community, as Erika Anthony (p. 10) reminded us.

In this issue, we offer a few examples of what different systems could look like with a stronger infusion of democracy, and what a stronger democracy could do to strengthen our communities and other systems. So what could community development look like if we truly lifted every voice?

At ThirdSpace, we believe that in order to make structural change, we must break the cycle of urgency and replace it with a more intentional, deliberate cycle. We believe a continual process of awareness-building of structural racism's persistence can lead to more thoughtful action. In our fight to move toward a truer democracy, we hope you will use this issue as one step as a proposal to begin to reflect and heal as we move towards a future, anti-racist vision. Here, we offer three suggested action steps forward.

OFFERING 1: RESEARCH YOUR BALLOT.

In order to know where we're going, we need to know where we came from. The issue harkens back to the history of organizing, which some attribute to the beginnings of the community development sector. What does this look like in the place where you are working? Study the history and policies that shaped community development in your community. What communities did

urban renewal bulldoze? What organizations arose from protests? Who are the community leaders who have shaped your community? Where do you see themes of democracy building, and where do you see threats to equitable democracy building?

OFFERING 2: MAKE A PLAN.

Democracy doesn't just happen in the White House or our State Houses. It happens every day in our institutions, organizations, community groups, and families. Where can we share power to form more democratic relationships and structures? We can assess the power that each of us holds and identify ways to shift that power, whether that is in a boardroom, a town hall, a staff meeting, or a dinner table. Identify where democracy building practices might fit into your work.

OFFERING 3: TRIPLE YOUR VOTE.

You've identified your anti-racist practices and how you can grow in your approach. Now who will do it with you? Democracy functions with relationships. As practitioners, our communities have deep and urgent needs that can keep our heads down and our priorities laser focused. This is essential to advancing the work – and the needs of communities are also interconnected. This requires us to connect across silos with other practitioners who embrace an anti-racist approach to community development. Take a look at the community development ecosystem as a place to start and map your relationships.

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