SPREADING THE NARRATIVE HOUSE: OUR COURSE OF ACTION

This section seeks to capture the ways in which organizers, storytellers, and organizations within the social and racial justice ecosystem may find the Narrative House useful. Framing activities utilizing the Narrative Areas of Opportunities can also be found in the resources section of the microsite.

Just like there is no one way to decorate or find comfort in a physical house, we believe that there is no single way for the Narrative House to be used—that is the beauty of schematics. In this section, we’ve provided prompts, questions, and ideas that may facilitate an array of activities, action, or workshops at different levels of storytelling.

We believe organizations, artists, writers, showrunners, policymakers, funders, and others who are committed to racial and social justice will find the Narrative House useful in helping them take an organizational stance in favor of reparations for Black people. The Narrative House is a tool that can help these groups make meaning of and articulate a communications, policy or narrative strategy that supports greater alignment across the movement.

For those aforementioned groups that have the communications infrastructure and capacity (e.g., dedicated communications, marketing, advocacy, or narrative staff), we recommend holding space for a conversation grounded in the question, “what is our organizational stance on the topic of Black reparations?”

The following questions and activities may be helpful in answering this question, but we invite you to use the Narrative House in a way that may best suit your organizational needs.
NARRATIVE NORTH STAR:

Start by having staff read the Narrative North Star out loud and ask the following questions:

- What emotions were apparent in your body as the North Star was being read? Why do you think these emotions were apparent?
- What does a future world where reparations for Black people are realized look like? What if anything would you add to the North Star?
- Does your organization have its own Narrative North Star? (A version of this could be articulated in an organization’s mission or vision statement). If not, ask yourselves the following questions:
  - What does society look like once we’ve achieved our mission and shut the doors to our organization?
  - What does that society feel like?
  - What do people get up and do in the morning that is different than the way we start our days currently?

Narrative North Star Questions:

Fill in the following blanks. Living in a future world where reparations are realized is like ______ because of ______. This activity was a key aspect in constructing our Narrative North Star and elicited responses from Lab members such as:

- "A future world where Black reparations are possible taste like cotton candy because it’s sweet."
- "A future world where Black reparations are possible feels like pushing the reboot button because it gives us the opportunity to start over."
- "A future world where Black reparations are possible feels like being on the beach because it’s peaceful."
Please see the framing activities on the microsite within the Narrative House section to find ways to explore each Narrative Area of Opportunity in further detail.

Inspired by our project consultant, Melinda Weekes-Laidlow, and our friends who were involved in the Story at Scale project, we view this area of the Narrative House as one of the most potent areas for ideation and exploration. Each Narrative Area of Opportunity provides different openings for telling a story of reparations through a different frame. We understand that one Narrative Area of Opportunity may resonate with one person or organization over another. We hope that these can help support brainstorming about ways in which organizations (or individuals) can find their own voice within this space.

For too long, reparations has been framed strictly through a financial lens, and as we articulated earlier in this report, the financial aspect of reparations is important, but it does not tell the full story of how we repair the social, psychological, physical, and emotional harm that slavery and the vestiges thereof has caused. We envision the Narrative Areas of Opportunity as fodder for exploration of framing strategies that may go beyond what we’ve detailed in the House.

Scholars have noted that collective action frames can help “mobilize potential adherents and constituents to garner bystander support and to demobilize antagonists.”

Like the rest of the Narrative House, the Narrative Areas of Opportunity listed are not the only frames that will be helpful in storytelling about reparations. We believe these framing areas will both help increase understanding of how to frame reparations as a solution to a number of different problems our country faces and facilitate on-ramps in specific spaces of public discourse.

It is important to mention that in using different frames within social movements there is always the potential for an overemphasis on a specific frame that may lead to the development of different factions within the movement. For example, a study of the anti-death penalty movement found that the movement splintered into two specific camps, which the study described as “abolitionists and litigators,” with the former advocating for abolishment of capital punishment and the latter focusing on the more modest task of saving lives of their clients one by one rather than as a class.

While this may sound alarming, throughout the Lab, we continuously returned to the words spoken by Lab member Rob Thomas, who noted that “we need unity, not uniformity” or what our friends at Narrative Initiative might call a polyvocal approach to narrative change. “Alternate meanings and translations don’t diminish a narrative,” according to Narrative Initiative, and embracing a polyvocal approach will allow us to encourage as many people and voices to enter the movement and “expand the potential for successful deployment and uptake of narratives.”

Sociologist Erving Goffman, author of, "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience," defined frames as “schemata of interpretation that allows individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label, experiences and stories in their own life.” We envision that these Narrative Areas of Opportunity will provide support in making reparations resonate on a personal level with different audiences across the country.

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172 Weidinger, Rachel. Polyvocal narrative strategy: Turning many voices into durable change. Narrative Initiative. 2020
Those interested in using any of the Narrative Areas of Opportunity may ask themselves the following questions:

- Which Narrative Area of Opportunity align most with the work and/or campaigns that you are already working on?
- Take stock of the different frames your organization currently uses (e.g., human rights framing, justice framing, equity framing, etc.):
  - What are the characteristics of the frames you currently use?
  - How were they developed?
  - How have they furthered the work of your organization?
  - In what ways do they intersect with the Narrative Areas of Opportunity within the Narrative House?
- Look back through the history of your organization/issue you are focused on and name different important historical events where a frame was amplified and/or developed. What are some potential inciting events that may further the Narrative Areas of Opportunity in relation to your organization’s mission?
- What are the constraints blocking these opportunities? (refer to the Narrative Roadblocks) What activities can be deployed through your organization to explore the telling of stories that may sit within these opportunities?
- These Narrative Areas of Opportunity are not static, similar to collective action frames, they will evolve and be transformed as the movement progresses. Is there a framing area that you think is missing from the Narrative House that aligns with your work?

- If so, how would you articulate it?
- What are the social, political, and/or economic factors that might affect how this frame operates within the movement and broader society?
- Who is your primary audience? What Narrative Area of Opportunity may be the most appealing to them and why?
  - What Narrative Area of Opportunity may resonate best with your target audience in the short-term (1-3 years) and in the long-term (5-10 years)?
- Which Narrative Areas of Opportunity speak to each other? Are there ways that they can be connected in a transformational way?
- What specific stories might exist in the different Narrative Area of Opportunities?
- What cultural values exist within the different Narrative Area of Opportunities?
- How do the different Narrative Area of Opportunities connect with other social movements or issue?
- How can the Narrative Area of Opportunities be explored and deepened to anticipate your opposition?
- What narrative roadblock does each Narrative Area of Opportunity transform?
- What ways have the Narrative Area of Opportunities shown up through the media?
The Core Narrative section of the Narrative House is what we hope to see plastered on billboards and protest signs, mentioned in quotes to press, and repeated in conversations and dialogues on reparations. They are an on-ramp to the ideas and themes that undergird the stories that we hope can spread throughout society.

Across movements, slogans or mottos emerge such as “We Shall Overcome,” used by participants in the Civil Rights Movement, “Reconciliation is Dead,” a phrase used by Indigenous populations in Canada to underscore the fact that promises of “reconciliation” by the Canadian government have gone unkept or “Si Se Puede,” a term used by the farm workers movement in the 1970s. More recently, the rallying cry of “Stop Cop City,” emerged almost immediately after news that the Atlanta Police Department would be building a military grade training facility in the South River Forest on the outskirts of Atlanta.

Activists and the social movements they organize according to Dr. Sidney Tarrow, should be seen as both “consumers of existing cultural meanings and producers of new meanings.” We hope that the reparations movement and the Narrative House schematic can support the production of new meanings and understandings of race, capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism in this country. To achieve this, we hope to popularize these core narratives to a point where they become a part of our society’s vernacular—and can be understood without additional context.

These core narratives can help organizations and individuals make inferences about an understanding of reparations that appropriately places it within an adequate social, economic, psychological, and political context and helps the public think beyond just the financial aspect of reparations.

More core narratives may emerge, particularly within specific cities and states across the country, in deeper exploration of the Narrative Areas of Opportunity. Emergence, according to writer and organizer adrienne maree brown, “notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies.” As more connections are made within the reparations movement, we envision, both at the narrative and interpersonal levels, more core narratives will emerge and spread across spaces.

Organizers and communications/narrative staff within organizations may answer the following questions:

- Are there any current campaigns or storytelling initiatives that you are currently involved in and/or leading that already focus on reparations or employ a reparative lens? (ie: baby bonds, guaranteed income pilots, bail funds, etc)
  - If so, are there any core narratives in the Narrative House that can be used or modified that support that work?
  - If not, are there core narratives that you currently use or would like to use that would push forward narratives surrounding repair and/or reparations?

- Do your campaigns or storytelling initiatives uplift any core narrative (or one close to it) identified in the Narrative House? If so, what are they, and how do they show up in your communications, advocacy, and/or policy materials and initiatives?

- Do your campaigns or storytelling initiatives face any of the narrative roadblocks identified in this report? If so, what are the ways in which we are currently working to counter these narratives?

- Are there any core narratives that are listed in the Narrative House that can be infused within your campaigns?

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The story level of the Narrative House should be the most appealing to writers, showrunners, producers, filmmakers, and anyone else involved in creating story arcs. In our thinking about storytelling and how to construct stories that would support the reparations movement, conversations often went outside the policy realm, and touched on the different stories we must tell about history, Black life, and the world on the other side of a reparations process.

Stories provide a window for which reparations can be better understood across age, race, political affiliation, gender, religion, and other social identities. We believe that stories, when told well, can fill the gap in understanding about repair as a concept and reparations specifically for the Black community. In this level of the Narrative House, we name the types of stories Lab members wanted to see more of. In many ways, we see this level of the Narrative House being used as a visualization pre-production tool for stories that we hope to see across mediums.

It’s critical that we also point out that our movements rely on the same mass media that has been at the center of perpetuating anti-Black stereotypes, some which have directly led to the lynching of Black people. In thinking about narrative power, the narrator of the stories we want to see are critical. A critical part of this work that the Narrative House does not explore is what a thorough and deep investment in Black-owned storytelling infrastructure could look like—we must own the means of production of our stories from the writing, filming, editing, and production. We must do this while also disrupting the current media infrastructure whose major actors have played a significant role in developing and sustaining anti-Black tropes.

If we think of this section of the Narrative House as a mood board for the types of stories that we’d like to see told at scale, then the following questions may be helpful to those who are interested in producing and/or funding in this realm:

**Fiction:** Choose a specific part of the story level of the Narrative House.

- What are the critical parts of this story that you want to tell (ie: For a story about slavery that doesn’t center violence, you could craft a story on the love between two young people on a plantation or a family being reconnected after being separated for decades)?

- What are the narrative elements (plot, conflict, rising action, falling action, setting, tension, etc.) that you want to explore in this story? What is your narrative arc?
  - What are three key scenes that you’d like to see in this story area?

- Is there a Narrative Area of Opportunity that fits into this story (ie: a story about an alternative universe where Black leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Fred Hampton weren’t murdered could explore multiple NOA’s including Radical Solidarity, Black History in Your Face!, and Cycle Breaking, World Making)?

- What are the overarching themes that you’d like to communicate through this story? (see deep narratives for inspiration)

- What are the emotions that you’d like the story to evoke and why?

- What narrative roadblock does this story push back against?

- Who is your primary audience and what are you hoping they learn or get activated about when consuming this story?

- How does this story allow audiences to identify with either the characters or the plot of the story?
STORYTELLING EXERCISE:
Introducing a Black Liberated Future

Exercise 1:

- Revisit the “Black Liberated Future,” section of the Narrative House and read the short paragraph in that section.
- Place yourself in 2040, the United States has passed a federal reparations bill five years prior, what does society look like? What time do you get up? What is the first thing that you do when you wake? What do you do with yourself? What does labor look like across society? How does your body feel?
- Imagine you overhear your Black neighbor talking to their parents; it’s a happy conversation. What are they talking about?

Exercise 2:

Choose a topic from the ‘stories’ section of the Narrative House.

- Who or what is the main focus of your story?
- What are the critical parts of the story that you want to tell?
- What are the narrative elements (conflict, rising action, falling action, setting, tension, etc) that you want to explore in this story? What is your narrative arc?
  - What are three key scenes that you like to see in this story area?
- Who has covered this story before?
  - What did they get right or wrong in your opinion?
  - What frame was this story told through?
  - Who were the characters in the story? What part of their story might need more exploration?

Storytelling Exercise: Writing your own story

- What other pieces of research needs to be done?
  - What data (qualitative or quantitative) can be used to emphasize parts of your story?
- Is this story a personal story? If so, inquire about care for the story or community you are documenting (pulling directly from the BROKE project’s “Self Care for Storytellers”)  
  - “Have you invested time to build a relationship with the community and the people you are asking to share their stories?”
  - “Have you invested time with the community to learn from them and have them guide your approach to strategy and storytelling?”
  - “Have you been vulnerable with the community and shared your own story and motivation for your work?”
  - “Have you given space for the storyteller to share what is true for them, without leading them to tell a particular type of story?”
  - “Are you showing respect to your storyteller by listening with an open mind and heart to their story and knowledge?”
  - “Are you careful not to try to conform the storyteller’s experience to a particular trope, stereotype or eurocentric way of telling the story?”
  - “As you design your strategy and partnership with storytellers, how can you build in trust, transparency, and respect?”

176 Self-Care for Storytellers, Or Your Story is Yours. BROKE Project.
**Storytelling Exercise:** Framing the Black Panthers

This storytelling exercise was inspired by Professor Tilar J. Mazzeo of Colby College who wrote an excellent course guide for creative nonfiction writing.177 One of the most important parts of a story is its introduction—how readers, viewers, or listeners are pulled into the story often depends on how strong its beginning is. Mazzeo defines “story starters,” as “the combination of character, conflict, and narrative that sets a story in motion—an essential element of a great beginning.”178 They developed the following writing exercise which we’ve repurposed to center repair and reparations.

- Picture yourself as a journalist and look at the below picture of Black Panthers standing outside a courthouse.
  - What might a story from the mainstream press focus on at the time (late 1960s–1970s)? What frame might they tell the story through? Would they lift up any of the narrative roadblocks named in this report? Why or why not?
  - What is the story that you want to tell in this picture? What Narrative Area of Opportunity outlined in the report would you employ? Is there a narrative roadblock that you would seek to push back against? What is the narrative arc of this story? How did we arrive at this point and at what point of the story are we in?

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178 Ibid.

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There are a number of characters who could serve as the main character—the man farthest down the steps, the younger looking Black man at the center of the picture, the white sheriff with the hat on, the photographer, or yourself as the narrator. Which personal lens do you want to tell the story through?

- Use what you know about the Black Panther Party (or take 20 minutes to research who started it, what they stood for, and some of their initiatives) and write a scene using this picture.

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MESSAGES

The message level of the Narrative House is the most malleable part of the House and least prescriptive. Our goal in this level of the Narrative House was not to provide the exact messages that everyone must say. Instead, we sought to give a snapshot of the messages that movement actors who are actively engaged in this debate use everyday in explaining their work or reaching their audiences. We hope that the Narrative House and this report in its totality can support organizations in the crafting of talking points about reparations.

For organizations that are interested in crafting their own messages and talking points about reparations, some questions to consider include:

- What is your organizational voice? What spaces are your perspectives currently respected in? (i.e.: conversations about equity, conversations about gender equality, conversations about democracy, etc.)
- Do you have an internal and external public stance on the topic of reparations? If not, what is the process to craft a stance? Once a stance is identified, how can the organization communicate the stance clearly in its external communication materials?
- What about the topic of reparations is important to your organization? How does it relate to your overall mission? How may it fit into our broader advocacy/policy/communication strategy?
- What relationships does the organization have with organizations and individuals who are embedded in the reparations movement already? Where can new relationships potentially be formed?
- Is there local policy or organizing work happening in your area? How, if at all, can your organization support that work?

Crafting Talking Point Suggestions:

- Frame the topic of reparations beyond monetary compensation/financial repair (while still emphasizing the importance of money and addressing the Black-white wealth gap).
- Remind audiences of the array of disparities that exist for Black communities in wealth, income, housing, education, healthcare, and incarceration—and that these disparities are a result of government action/inaction rooted in anti-Blackness.
- Remind audiences that white communities were able to grow wealth through government support (Homestead Act, GI Bill, home loans, etc) that Black people were systematically excluded from.
- Name uprooting anti-Blackness as a key goal that reparations seeks to achieve and is both a part of the journey toward reparations and a part of the destination that reparations will bring us toward.
- Discuss how other reparations efforts, both nationally and internationally, set a precedent for reparations for Black Americans.
  - Germany’s reparations payments to Holocaust survivors
Messages

- The U.S. reparations compensation to Japanese-Americans for the unlawful incarceration during World War II

- Use affirming language and avoid reinforcing the narrative roadblocks and our opposition’s frame.

- Highlight systemic problems and frame reparations for Black people as part of a broader suite of systemic solutions (which could also include universal policies like universal basic income, universal housing or other reparative solutions). It’s important, particularly for policymakers, to understand reparations as not in opposition to other economic policy proposals but in addition to.

- Make unity, liberty, justice, and healing explicit outcomes of reparations while providing a clear picture of what reparations policies will deliver. In addition to framing reparations as closing socioeconomic gaps, discuss the moral implications of reparations and the need to right our country’s wrongs.

- Consider framing reparations as a continual cycle instead of something that the U.S. can commit to for a short while.

- Be specific about how the history of anti-Blackness shows up in society, and its role as a key characteristic in U.S. culture. Show the relationship between structural racism and anti-Blackness.

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**DEEP NARRATIVES**

The deep narrative level of the Narrative House signifies the themes that we envision being uplifted across stories related to reparations for Black people. Some of the other deep narratives named throughout our process included:

- Unity
- Care
- Pride
- Holistic

One of our inspirations for these deep narratives was the narrative system on immigrant narratives that were developed in the Butterfly Lab.

The Butterfly Lab identified six deep narratives they believe will “allow immigrant narrative workers to find alignment and consensus across projects and timelines, and to connect their work with other social movements.” Similarly, we see these deep narratives as areas for those focused on racial and economic justice to track the underlying themes that undergird our stories—and the Narrative House in its entirety as a tool for alignment.

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Some considerations when exploring this floor of the Narrative House are:

- What are the deep narratives that your organization currently employs?
- Is there a deep narrative named in the Narrative House that resonates with your organization or individual voice already?
- What deep narratives might resonate the most with your target audience?
- How can these deep narratives be woven throughout your storytelling and other communication materials?
- How can you make these deep narratives coherent in your daily work?
- Where might there be alignment in deep narratives across movements and/or issue areas?