



Bending the Arc: Narrative Power, Healing-Centered Leadership, and Systems Change for and with Opportunity Youth

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**Bending the Arc: Narrative Power, Healing-Centered Leadership,
and Systems Change for and with Opportunity Youth**

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed. L.D.) Capstone

Submitted by
Monique Miles

To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education Leadership

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Dedications

To my Eli the Pie Guy: Thriving in this world requires deep healing. The greatest gift of my life is your love and friendship, Eli. Both of these things help me to continuously heal and grow into my highest self, while remembering to laugh and inspiring me to dream, for myself and on behalf of my ancestors, and specifically for all of the Black women who came before me who couldn't dream because they didn't receive enough rest, enough love, or enough oxygen. Your love for me heals them, too, E. Conceiving of this degree and attaining it have both *only* been possible because of your enduring support, love, and friendship. Thank you, Eli. The closest I can get to articulating my love and abiding gratitude, are captured in the following quote adapted from Toni Morrison's (2007) *Beloved*:

He's a friend of my mind. He gather me. The pieces I am, he gathers them and gives them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a partner who is a friend of your mind. (p. 272)

To my Sie Pie: Always remember that you were born in my heart years before you were conceived. You are the *very* first manifestation of my prayers and dreams. Watching you grow from a child into a young, wise, earnest King with a clear vision for your future is one of the greatest joys of my life. No matter how heavy your crown may feel at times, keep growing into it, Elijah. Walk the path before you with joy, confidence, and intention, knowing that your purpose was formed in my womb. Keep your radiant, beautiful smile, keep dancing, and keep a song in your heart, always, Sie—and sing out loud *whenever* you need to, love. Always discern the price of the ticket and remember, “you never know if you don't go. You'll never shine if you don't glow” (Smash Mouth, 2009).

To my Elly Kelly Cakes: Watching you grow into the intelligent, strong, and compassionate young woman you are today warms my soul. You were named after Ella Baker

and you, dear Ella, come from a legacy of wisdom, strength, and resilience. These attributes live in you—especially the way you refuse to be anything less than the brilliant young Queen that you are. I see your courage, your depth, your determination, and your Light. Enjoy every season of life, trusting that wherever it takes you, you will carry your strength, intellect, purpose, and legacy with you. It has been especially fun doing homework together these past few years. I am going to miss it, even as I’m grateful that I got to be a student with you. Remember Ella: “Do you twinkle—of course you’re a shooting star” (Secret Agent 23 Skidoo, 2011).

To my Emmy Einstein: Always remember that Emerson means *strength*, and Grace means *divine favor and elegance* in movement, kindness, and being. Together, your names mean wisdom. Remember that wisdom, and all of the intuition that lives within you, are your superpower. Trust this power to fuel your life and to guide you at every turn. You were prayed for before we knew your name. Your joy, keen intellect, spunk, and love of singing and dancing are unmatched. Joy is something you practice every day. Keep shining bright, Emerson, letting your passions, curiosity, deep sense of justice, and growing faith to be a compass. Trust that your heart is a beacon, made to exchange love. And let your smile remain your signature—because “whenever I see your smiling face, I have to smile myself, because I love you, yes I do” (Taylor, 2018).

To Elijah, Ella, and Emerson Grace: Thank you for supporting me, for cheering me on, and for giving me grace to achieve this important milestone. May the benefits of this achievement be realized by every generation that is to come. It is the honor of my life, and nourishing to my momma heart, to be a mom to each of you. You all are my greatest blessing and greatest legacy. Be curious. Ask questions. Build things. Dream expansively. Pray. Forgive. Heal.

Always remember to lift as you climb (Terrell, 1896, as cited in Library of Virginia), and never forget what Langston Hughes (1922) wrote:

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now —

for I'se still goin', honey,

I'se still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (lines 15-20)

To my Juany: You, dear sister, have always been generous. You have always given me so many gifts. When I was four, you gave me the gift of literacy. When our home was unstable, you gave me the gift of stable, consistent, unconditional love, coupled with protection. When it was time for me to leave home for boarding school, you gave me warm love, nourishing food, and good company to return home to, ensuring I always felt like I belonged. And when Eli and I started our family, you passed all of that abiding love, generosity, kindness, and nourishment onto Elijah, Ella, and Emerson Grace. Thank you for loving me, championing my goals and dreams, and for being so present in all of our lives. Makidada, Juany-Buany, for life (Spielberg, 1985, 2:28:50).

To my Livvy: “But only you saw what took many time to see. I dedicate this to you for believing in me” (Rock & Smooth, 1992, 3:20).

To my Mash-Mashy-Mash: There is no version of this achievement that exists without your wisdom, love, and abiding, deeply nourishing friendship.

To my Uncle Teddy: Thank you for modeling abiding love for family, a commitment to hard work, and for showing up so consistently for the Miles family, especially me. You are the

blueprint our ancestors prayed for, and our descents are blessed to have access to. Thank you for being “THE (very best) UNCLE”!!

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To my Mamacita: You taught me how to see before I had language for what I was seeing. You carried so much more than I was capable of understanding during your lifetime. Most importantly, you loved me, worked for me, and sacrificed for me in ways that I am still learning to name and working to honor. So much of who I am—how I listen, how I care for others, my abiding love for fashion, and how I love on my children—was shaped in your presence, and by your absence. One of the greatest privileges of my life is to honor your legacy through my commitment to advancing equity and justice around the globe, especially for and with women.

My life work is, in many ways, a continuation of what you, and the Black women who came before us, began. I offer my work as an honoring and a becoming --

of you,

of me,

and on behalf of *everything* generations of Black women have been building, even when we did not yet have the words, or freedom to express ourselves. As Lucille Clifton (1993) wrote,

won't you celebrate with me
what I have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model. born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself? (lines 1–6)

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Abstract

This capstone examined how narrative power was harnessed and deployed within a national network and broader justice movement to influence systems change aimed at improving outcomes for opportunity youth, defined as young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are out of school and work. The strategic project was designed and implemented at the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS), which is the home of the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF), a network of 45 place-based urban, rural, and Indigenous community collaboratives working across education, workforce, justice, and social service systems. While the network had achieved measurable progress in reducing youth disconnection, this work began with the notion that power operates through meaning-making and that durable change requires transforming the narratives that shape whose lives, knowledge, and futures are valued.

Guided by this premise—and grounded in Black feminist and womanist thought—the project tested how healing practices, coupled with narrative change strategies, could be operationalized through leadership practice, capacity building, network alignment, and youth leadership. It unfolded in three phases: (1) strengthening embodied leadership and a culture of care, (2) building narrative strategy capacity across the network, and (3) supporting coordinated narrative efforts and youth-led storytelling. Core activities included organizational care processes, narrative strategy trainings, cross-network convenings, and small grants to young adult partners.

The findings indicated that narrative change is not primarily driven by communications efforts but by the interaction of leadership practice, relational trust, distributed capacity, and coordinated action. Leadership practices rooted in care enabled collaboration, investments in narrative fluency strengthened leaders' ability to challenge dominant frames, and network structures supported the spread and reinforcement of aligned narratives. Consistent with Black

feminist theory on epistemic power, youth leadership proved critical in shifting whose knowledge was recognized as credible and authoritative.

This capstone argues that narrative power functions as core infrastructure for systems change. For AFCS and OYF, embedding healing and narrative strategy into leadership development, network learning, and youth governance strengthened long-term impact. For the broader social sector, the findings suggest that durable narrative change requires distributed leadership, coordinated networks, and the centering of those most impacted as authors and authorities of new narratives.

“Transform yourself, to transform the world.”

Grace Lee Boggs(as cited in brown, 2017, p. 53)

Chapter 1: Introduction

“The North won the Civil War, but the South won the narrative war.”

Bryan Stevenson (Morgan, 2019, para. 3)

Bryan Stevenson’s statement is not a speculative reflection; it is an evaluation of American democracy. Stevenson names a truth that lives at the heart of this capstone: the notion that changing policies, laws, systems, and institutions without transforming narratives results in hollow, fragile victories that are easily upended. Changing laws without transforming the broader culture enables stories that shape who belongs, who has access to opportunity, and who decides the answers to these questions to dictate generational outcomes. In other words, the narrative war was lost, and the consequences have echoed across generations, especially for Black, Latine, and Indigenous young people, families, and communities.

From the Supreme Court’s legal declaration of Black inferiority to the Jim Crow racial caste hierarchy that birthed tropes of the “welfare queen” and myths about the Black “super-predator,” harmful, false narratives have reinforced inequality in the United States since the country’s inception. From destructive stories of disconnected youth to the digital racial profiling of Black, Latine, and Indigenous adolescents on social media, narratives of inferiority have validated and reinforced unequal systems, shaping what feels possible and whose future is guaranteed.

This capstone begins with a foundational premise: that the meaningful and sustainable transformation of policies and systems requires changing the narratives that undergird them. This requires creating the relational, structural, and leadership conditions necessary for narrative power to be harnessed and employed collectively. My strategic project explored how embodied

leadership, distributive narrative capacity, movement alignment, and youth agency function together to foster narrative power within the opportunity youth ecosystem led by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) and the national Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF), a network-based initiative housed within AFCS. My strategic project for my residency, and this accompanying capstone, were together an exploration of power.

The Problem: Narratives as the Foundation of Inequality and Inequity

As asserted in a paper published by PolicyLink (2023), narratives are “the big stories we tell ourselves about the world, rooted in our values, that influence how we process information and make decisions” (p. 4). In other words, narratives are not simply stories. They serve as the infrastructure of how everything operates in the United States and around the world, including how laws are shaped, how funding flows, how institutions and systems behave, and how social norms are performed. As cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2004) reminded us, “frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (p. xi) including how we understand reality. The retelling of these frames embeds them into our collective consciousness so that they shape what we consider to be common sense. Political scientists Herman and Chomsky (2008) noted that dominant institutions reproduce selective worldviews through media systems. Their idea built upon Gaventa’s (1982) theory of invisible power, which stipulates that norms—or internalized beliefs—shape what is recognized, approved, and valued, long before policy enters the debate.

In the case for opportunity youth—defined by the U.S. government (Youth.gov, n.d.) as young people between the ages of 16 to 24 who are out of school and out of work—the dominant narrative has been one of individual failure, moral deficit, and a lack of personal responsibility and accountability, all while these people navigated systems that were never designed for them.

In the United States, there are approximately four million opportunity youth. Nearly one million of these youth and young adults reside in OYF communities. The stakes for reconnecting these young people are grave and span narratives, cultures, institutions, and generations. The costs are social, economic, and democratic.

As time has demonstrated, when harmful narratives function as the currency of social interactions, policy and legal wins are ephemeral, philanthropy is affected by pendulum swings, and our structures and systems continuously reproduce intergenerational harm. Recent evidence of this claim includes upending affirmative action, reversing *Roe v. Wade*, and gutting elements of the Voting Rights Act. Given this reality, the core message of this capstone is that narrative power is foundational to systemic change.

Organizational Context and Reflection

AFCS was launched in 2012 in response to a call to action from the White House Council for Community Solutions under President Obama. From its beginning, AFCS has focused on two core areas of learning and impact: scaling cross system and sector collaboration through collective impact and improving outcomes for opportunity youth.

To accomplish the latter, OYF supports a national network of 45 place-based collaborative partnerships in rural, urban, and Indigenous communities across the United States (see Figure 1). Collaboratives in the OYF work across the five systems of K–12 education, postsecondary, career, justice, and foster care to build and expand reconnection pathways that reduce disconnection and promote social, economic, and civic engagement. In 2023, OYF set an audacious national goal: to reduce the national number of youth disconnected from education and careers by 50% across the national network, resulting in 500,000 reconnected young people (see Figure 2). Within 2 years of establishing this goal, the network achieved a 20% reduction.

This progress was both significant and telling. It not only illuminated what is possible; it also served as a roadmap for how to achieve meaningful, bold social change.

Figure 1

OYF Network

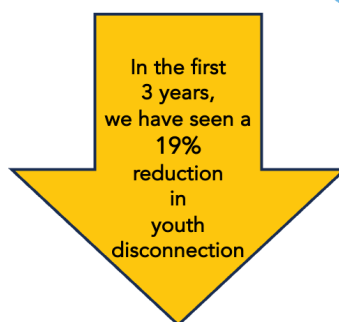
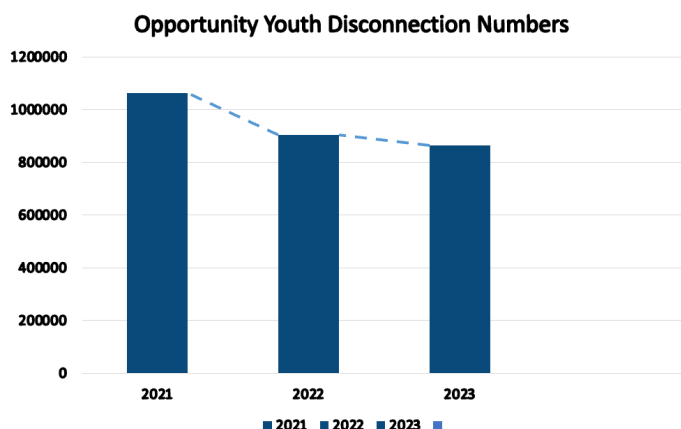


Source: AFCS, Nemoy, Y. (2025). *New participant orientation* [PowerPoint presentation]. Slide 12.

Figure 2

OYF Impact Goals

OYF Impact Goal: Reduce Youth Disconnection By 50% in OYF Communities or 500,000 OY



This puts us ahead of track to meet our 10-year, 50% reduction goal

Source: AFCS, Thompson, K. (2023). *New participant orientation* [PowerPoint presentation]. Slide 16.

The success of OYF led to an important reflection, and subsequent question, in the work at AFCS. What conditions are necessary to reduce youth disconnection and transform the social, cultural, and political environment that reproduces it, especially for Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth? To answer this question, in 2024 OYF engaged in a strategy design process aimed at informing the next 10 years of organizational priorities and work. Narrative change emerged as a cross-cutting lever positioned to influence everything from policy to advocacy, philanthropy, coalition-building, and driving place-based impact. This organizational reflection aligned with my own personal revelation: transforming external policies, systems, and narratives would require an internal shift rooted in healing, clarity, and a redefinition of my purpose. Given these synergies, this capstone communicates my personal evolution and its fractal relationship with AFCS and OYF's transformation.

Core Questions, Capstone Roadmap, and Why Narrative Change Matters Now

This capstone asked the following core questions: How do embodied leadership, distributive narrative capacity, movement alignment, and youth authority interact in practice to create the conditions for transformative narrative power within the opportunity youth ecosystem? Building on the initial question, I asked: How might partnering with colleagues, community leaders, and young adults align the movement around shared narratives that illuminate the truth, breadth, beauty, strength, and resiliency of young people and communities?

These questions centered four interlocking conditions as critical to transforming narrative power:

1. Embodied leadership and a culture of care that generate psychological safety and relational trust.

2. Distributed narrative strategy capacity that enables leaders across ecosystems to implement narrative tools strategically.
3. Movement-level alignment and coordinated amplification that institutionalizes coherence and shared meaning-making across networks and coalitions.
4. Youth-led narrative authority that redistributes epistemic power and reshapes who is recognized as credible.

Importantly, narrative change must be supported and scaffolded by leadership practice, organizational culture, infrastructure, and governance. As adrienne maree brown (2017) wrote in *Emergent Strategy*, “what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system” (p. 53). Similarly, narrative power is fractal. Specifically, how leaders relate internally shapes how networks behave and perform externally. In other words, embodied leadership—the foundational infrastructure of my internal work—scales to ecosystem alignment and coherence. Relatedly, Schein (2016) reminded us that “what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control” (p. 237) becomes shared belief about what matters. Therefore, if care, wellbeing, healing, and repair are institutionalized, then they become cultural signals that shape organizations’ priorities and programs.

The professional contribution this capstone makes to the field is to articulate how narrative change can be operationalized through leadership development, capacity-building, distributed governance, and youth agency.

Capstone Roadmap

This capstone unfolds in five sections, including an introduction and a *review of knowledge for action* section, which synthesizes academic scholarship across all four areas of my theory of action. The theory of action is divided into four phases; the first is focused on defining

narrative change, and the remaining phases, and overall design, are developmental, with each phase building into the next, moving from inner conditions to external transformation. The third chapter of this capstone includes the *description* section, which details the strategic interventions I undertook in each phase of my theory of action, followed by the *evidence* and *analysis* subsections, which assess the overall progress of my strategic project, drawing on survey data, network outputs, empathy interviews, and documented shifts in practice. I then offer implications for self, site, and sector, followed by the conclusion of this capstone.

Why Does Narrative Change Matter Now?

Today we are living in a period marked by radical democratic instability, hostile backlash to Black progress and wellbeing, and renewed attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Black history is not only being challenged but proactively dismantled. During this period, Black women in particular are experiencing historical displacement in the workplace. According to a recent *New York Times* (2026) article, “In 2024, 74 percent of Black women with bachelor’s degrees were employed; that rate fell to 71 percent in the first nine months of 2025” (para. 9). The article also notes that employment among white women with bachelor’s degrees declined by less than one percentage point over the same period (Holman, 2026, para. 9). This moment highlights that cultural power is not neutral, and narratives are not static.

For opportunity youth, especially Black, Latine, and Indigenous young people, 87% of which make up the OYF national network, the costs of disconnection perpetuated by historically racist systems built on false narratives are dire. The American Youth Policy Forum (2026) reported that opportunity youth “[costs] taxpayers \$93 billion annually and \$1.6 trillion over their lifetimes in lost revenues and increased social services” (para. 1). This is both staggering

and leads to intergenerational disparities that are structural in nature and reinforced through harmful narratives.

From the founding of this country, dominant frames have continued to reproduce unequal outcomes, impacting who has access to quality housing, family-sustaining wages, optimal healthcare, and more. As Manuel Castells (2013) noted, power lies in shaping meaning. This truth calls for a movement capable of coordinating an effective, sustainable, and durable narrative ecosystem with the ability to promote counternarratives. At the same time, healing, relational infrastructure, and an abiding commitment to personal and collective wellbeing must be the centerpiece of this work, to limit burnout and harm and to reproduce wellness, connection, and shared purpose. Justice work requires care to be effective and sustainable. This capstone offers a model for integrating healing into strategic narrative change and power-building efforts. It articulates how narrative change must be institutionalized, distributive, intergenerational, with youth at the center, and grounded in values of belonging, dignity, interdependence, and love.

Conclusion

This capstone aimed to contribute to practice and policy in three important ways. First, it endeavored to reframe narrative strategy as more than messaging, but rather as the infrastructure of meaningful cultural, system, and policy change. It also sought to make the case that narrative change and cultural strategy require healing-centered leadership and collective practices to drive narrative coherence and to influence policy. Finally, this capstone argued that youth voices are necessary but not sufficient in narrative change work. Youth governance and resource control in the context of intergenerational spaces translate into epistemic authority and justice (Collins, 2017). For the social sector, this capstone provides a blueprint for embedding narrative power into strategic planning, grantmaking, design, and ecosystem development.

This capstone opened with a quote from Grace Lee Boggs (1998): “Transform yourself to transform the world” (p. 155). This work seeks to tell the story of how I have lived, practiced, and led, following this call to action as a north star throughout my residency. Building a democracy that works for everyone, especially Black, Latine, and Indigenous young people, requires us to transform the stories that define their worth and limit their opportunities. To achieve these goals, leaders, networks, and ecosystems must be able to harness and exercise narrative power thoughtfully, strategically, and durably. This capstone highlights that journey, beginning with self, then organization, then network, before concluding at the movement level. The transformation of culture and narratives is long-term, multigenerational work that requires both the reshaping of self and enabling conditions that allow one to engage effectively in this work. This capstone documents how this pathway can look, while offering the field meaningful learning to build upon.

Chapter 2: Review of Knowledge for Action

“The stories we tell literally make the world.

If you want to change the world, you need to change your story.”

Michael Margolis, CEO of Get Storied (Twomey, 2019, para. 3)

Successfully implementing and scaling a narrative change agenda designed to transform culture requires an interdisciplinary grounding of content, along with intentionally curated research that combines theory and practice. Guided by both my theory of action and lived experience, the questions I asked to guide the following literature were: What is narrative change, and how do healing-centered, embodied leadership practices—scaled through narrative fluency, distributed leadership, ecosystem alignment, and youth decision-making authority—create both the relational and structural conditions necessary to shift harmful dominant narratives and foster durable, sustainable, movement-level power?

This inquiry suggested that narrative change is a developmental, multi-layered process that connects personal, embodied transformation to organizational culture, strategic capacity, coalition infrastructure, and intergenerational power. Each of the five areas that follow are organized around guiding research questions (RQs) that connected my theory of action to scholarship, to my lived experience and professional expertise, and to knowledge gleaned from the implementation of my strategic project.

The research areas addressed below include: (1) narrative change and cultural strategy, (2) embodied leadership and culture of care, (3) narrative strategy capacity and distributed leadership, (4) movement alignment and collective narrative power, and (5) youth-led narrative leadership and agency. Together, these areas of research progress from individual healing to

ecosystem power, arguing that sustainable narrative transformation requires aligned leadership, shared power, and coordinated action.

Narrative Change and Cultural Strategy

Guiding RQs: (1) What are narrative change and cultural strategy? (2) Why is narrative change important?

Over the past 20 years, the relationship between social movements and narrative change has grown increasingly important and interconnected in efforts to address issues like climate justice, marriage rights, and gender inclusion. This is because narratives shape how people understand the world, specifically the mindsets, beliefs, and values that guide individual and collective behavior.

For practitioners, activists, and community leaders working to shift narratives related to pressing social issues, a growing body of literature and research provides useful frameworks for effective strategies. Before reviewing the core elements of narrative change and cultural strategy, it is important to define the key terms that undergird this work, specifically the elements of the narrative pyramid (Race Forward, 2025), the framework that serves as the foundation of OYF’s narrative change agenda.

The Narrative Pyramid: Stories, Narratives, Deep Narratives, and Messages

Beginning with stories and narratives, FrameWorks Institute, a key partner in OYF’s narrative change work, defined stories as “tales about particular events and people; [they] may be true or fictional” (Miller et al., 2021, p. 6). Stories are powerful because they give meaning to lived experiences and shape collective understanding. The story of Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of the bus is a compelling one from the Civil Rights Movement. It is often used to teach about the movement for equal rights and freedoms.

Narratives, on the other hand, are “templates, or recurring patterns of meaning that cut across stories and tie them together; [they become] patterns of stories in public discourse” (FrameWorks Institute, 2024, p. 5). A narrative often associated with the Civil Rights Movement is that it was successful due to the heroic efforts of many individuals, including leaders like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bayard Rustin. In this instance, the narrative of heroic actors assigns meaning to the story of Rosa Parks and other movement leaders.

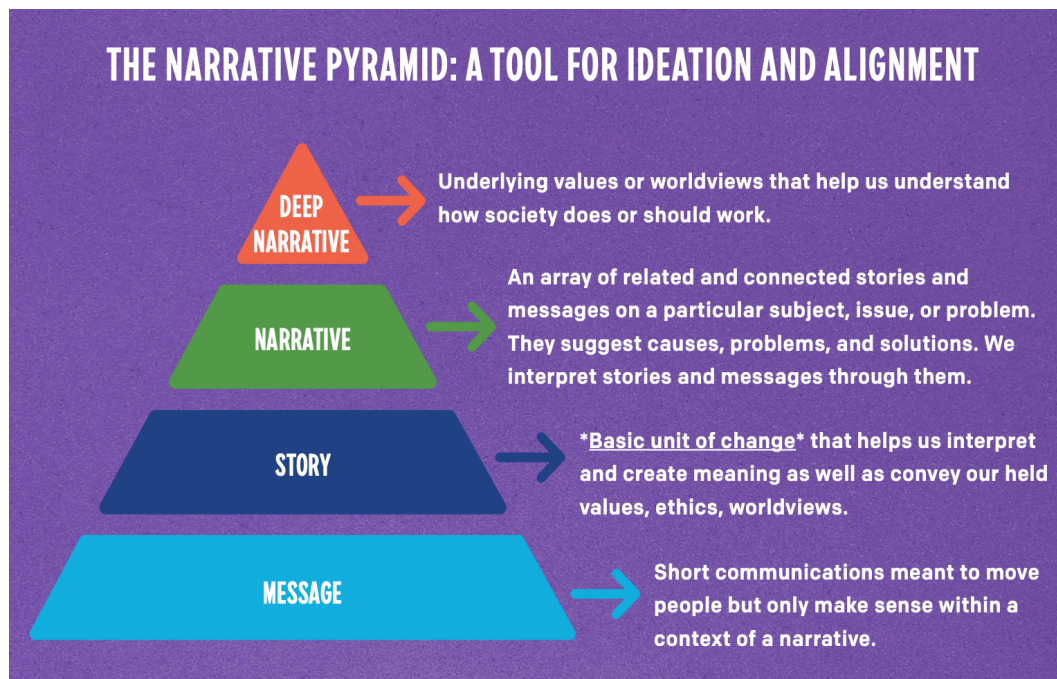
Stories and narratives have a mutually reinforcing relationship:

...both narratives and stories have familiar features like character, plot, setting, and point of view. Both narratives and stories feed each other: particular stories draw from overarching narratives, and the patterns in narratives can only exist because of the many stories that embody them. (FrameWorks Institute, 2024, p. 5)

As OYF communities and young adult partners worked together to codesign a narrative change agenda, understanding the relationship between stories and narratives—particularly their mutually reinforcing connections—was important. The narrative pyramid (see Figure 3) demonstrates the relationship between narratives and stories in a way that illuminates the potential harm that emerges from the ways in which many of the stories told in the United States depict Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth as less than human. This depiction has contributed to a broader narrative that devalues the lives and livelihoods of youth of color (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011; UnidosUS, 2011). Collectively, these narratives can show up as the root cause of many barriers youth of color face, including a lack of access to quality education, inadequate healthcare, and low wage employment. OYF is deeply committed to elevating counter-stories that center young people as narrators and protagonists of their own narratives, which is critical to shifting the mindsets, values, and beliefs of individuals and collective society.

Figure 3

The Narrative Pyramid



Source: Race Forward. (2025). *Messages to grow and uproot: Narrative strategy amid attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion, and racial justice*. P. 6.

Deep Narratives and Messages

Building on stories and narratives, Race Forward (2025) defined deep narratives as “values and worldviews” (p. 3), while Han and Kalra (2024) described deep narratives as “the unquestioned ‘truths’ normalized by society that feel like common sense but can uphold systemic oppression” (p. 5). Deep narratives—including those focusing on individualism, deservedness, and scarcity—highlight the values and abiding beliefs that lie at the heart of many of the social issues currently facing humanity. George Lakoff (2002), the cognitive linguist known for his scholarship on shifting the *moral frames* that impact how people interpret reality, made a compelling case for why narratives are so durable. According to Lakoff (2002), frames are mental structures that shape how people see, understand, and relate to reality because they serve

as pathways that organize reasoning, specifically common sense. The more a frame is repeated, the more it is embedded into public consciousness, which informs individual and collective sense-making. It impacts everything from how people make meaning of stories to societal norms and public policy.

Building on the concept of deep narratives, frames serve a similar function in that they are interpreted as moral structures that impact perception and, ultimately, decision-making. Lakoff (2002) also underscored the significance of counter-narratives, stating that even repeating a negative frame in an effort to dismiss it reinforces it because language activates mental structures. This admonishment is critical; it belies the importance of strategically designing narrative change efforts that aim to promote alternative values and frames and makes a compelling case for the work at Aspen.

Adding to the knowledge of how deep narratives operate, Herman and Chomsky (2008) argued that dominant narratives are both produced and reinforced through media systems with institutional power that serve two primary functions: to privilege a particular worldview, set of values, and deep narratives, while also castigating and marginalizing other frames, narratives, and knowledge systems.

Continuing with the example of the Civil Rights Movement, an operating deep narrative is that progress happened when many marginalized people came together to prove their deservedness using non-violent strategies, which resulted in a benevolent response from U.S. leadership. For youth and young adults of color, the deep narrative suggesting that these populations lack deservedness functions as a barrier to opportunity because this belief can result in poor education and a lack of access to quality jobs and secure housing (Rothstein, 2017), thus leading to high rates of disconnection from school and work and ultimately affecting wellbeing.

At the base of the narrative pyramid are *messages*, defined by Race Forward (2025) as “short, targeted communications designed to move people as part of a larger narrative strategy” (p. 3). A key message from the Civil Rights Movement is that peaceful protest is an effective tool to achieve social change. This message has been woven into many of the stories from the movement, which all together have reinforced narratives of heroism, which are rooted in deep narratives of deservedness and benevolence. Understanding the relationships between these elements helps practitioners, activists, and community leaders recognize how even a simple phrase—like *pull yourself up by your bootstraps*—connects to stories about self-made success, which reinforce narratives about personal responsibility and uphold deep narratives of individualism (Race Forward, 2025). These deep narratives of self-made individuals can be harmful, especially to Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth, because they reinforce the idea that hard work alone leads to success without accounting for the ways that racism, prejudice, and other intersecting forms of oppression are baked into systems and inhibit social and economic opportunity and mobility.

Cultural Strategy and Narrative Change

The Convergence Partnership (The Partnership) documented how narrative change drives social transformation and connected it to cultural strategy (Convergence Partnership, 2022). The Partnership defined cultural strategy as “an alignment of tactics to create new norms, language, practices, or relationships” (Convergence Partnership, 2022, p. 6). Together, narrative change and cultural strategies form “a long-term effort to raise certain values and diminish others in ways that engage diverse types of narrators and audiences” (Convergence Partnership, 2022, p. 4).

In essence, *narrative strategy* functions to change what people believe to be true, while *cultural strategy* functions to transform how those beliefs are lived out via norms and relationships. The key is that both narrative strategy and cultural strategy must interlock and be mutually reinforcing to achieve sustainable cultural change that results in new social systems, institutions, policies, and laws. This is the highest aspiration of a narrative change agenda.

Narrative Systems and Narrative Ecosystems

While stories, narratives, and messages provide the foundation for narrative change, transforming them at scale in ways that lead to broader social progress requires a focus on systems. Through its Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy initiative, Race Forward (2023) defined a narrative system as “a set of deep narratives that together, describe the worldview we want to activate at a majority level” (p. 53). A narrative system functions as a cohesive framework that aligns campaigns and coalitions working across diverse timelines—from rapid response initiatives to long-term cultural strategies—toward a shared and mutually reinforcing vision of social transformation.

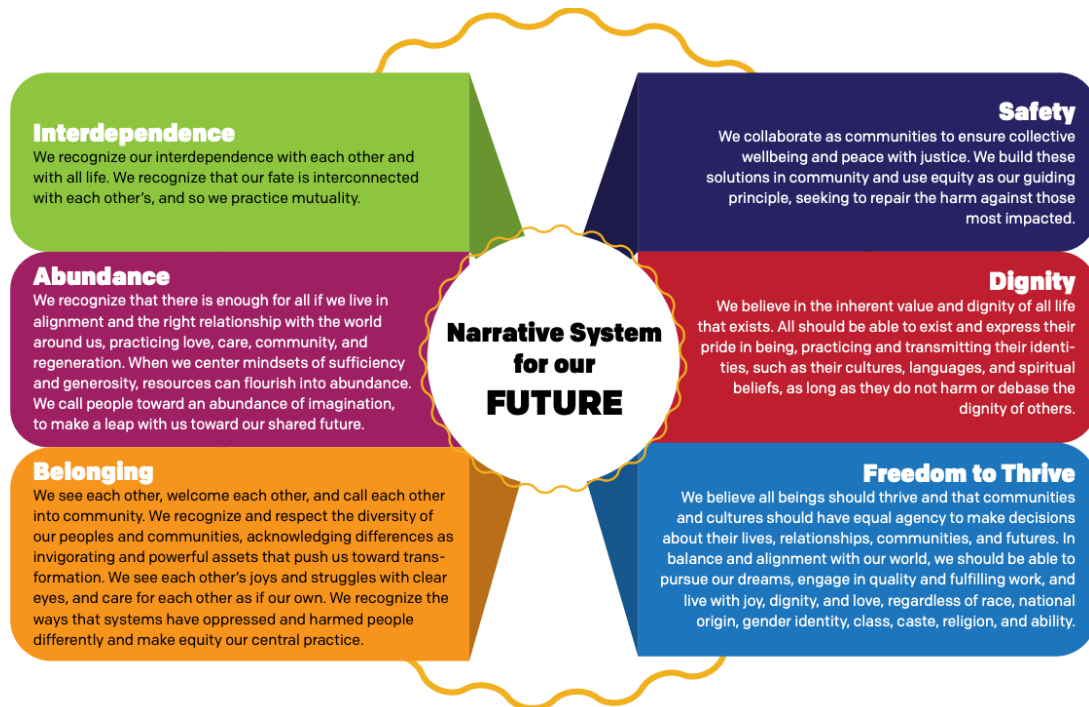
According to the Race Forward (2023), dominant “status quo” beliefs (e.g. white supremacy, scarcity, individualism, and the equation of human value with economic value) perpetuate harm, especially against Black, Indigenous, and Latine youth. In an effort to counter these harmful, toxic beliefs that undergird common narratives, Race Forward (2023) proposed an alternative framework, titled the “Narrative System for Our Future” (see Figure 4), comprised of the following beliefs about our shared humanity and collective future:

1. *Interdependence*: Recognizing our mutual connection to one another and to all life.
2. *Abundance*: Believing there is enough for all if we are in right relationship with each other and the earth.

3. *Belonging*: Respecting diversity and difference as an asset, while welcoming and caring for each other as our own.
4. *Safety*: Rooted in community building and an abiding commitment to repairing harm with each other and with the most marginalized.
5. *Dignity*: Belief in the inherent value and dignity of all life that exists.
6. *Freedom to thrive*: Belief [that] all beings should thrive and that communities and cultures should have equal agency to make decisions about their lives, relationships, communities, and futures.

Figure 4

Race Forward's (2023) Narrative System for Our Future



Each of these beliefs align deeply with OYF's core values of equity, justice, diversity, collaboration, and love (AFCS, n.d.-a). Given this alignment, the "Narrative System for Our Future" serves as a guiding foundation for OYF's narrative change and cultural strategy agenda,

ensuring that the final narrative strategy connected with these beliefs in ways that meaningfully guided future-facing work.

Finally, to achieve transformation at scale, narrative systems must connect to broader narrative ecosystems, defined as “networks of connected individuals and organizations that share knowledge, expertise, and ideas to advance a narrative system across diverse audiences, fronts, and timelines” (Race Forward, 2023, p. 37). In other words, a narrative ecosystem turns a constellation of narrative systems into a collective sky, wherein artists, journalists, strategists, researchers, and organizers collaborate to shift culture at scale.

Bringing it All Together: OYF’s Role and Vision

The OYF ecosystem of place-based collaboratives embodied the approach of bringing together diverse actors—from youth leaders and activists to system actors and strategic communication experts—to advance narrative change for and with young people. Across states like Texas, California, Minnesota, and Montana, cross-sector and cross-system partnerships have been aligning their strategies with the aim of reshaping public imagination related to young people and opportunity. This is important because OYF’s grantmaking portfolios—which range from creative youth development to healing-centered approaches—provide critical resources cultivated to support an ecosystem approach to achieving meaningful and sustainable social transformation.

OYF’s investments in communities serve as a bridge from local action to national movement-building and impact. By anchoring its narrative work in both a system and ecosystem framework, OYF has been building alignment across communities and sectors to create a shared story rooted in mutuality, solidarity, belonging, and transformation. Together, these efforts aim to move toward a collective future in which all young people—particularly Black, Indigenous,

and Latine youth—are recognized as narrators and protagonists in a new, equitable, and just narrative for our democracy.

Embodied Leadership and Cultures of Care

Guiding RQs: (1) How does inner transformation within leadership influence collective wellbeing and readiness for narrative change? (2) In what ways do embodied leadership practices shape psychological safety and relational trust? (3) How do shifts in leader self-work replicate across an organizational culture?

The first transformative area of focus for this capstone project was embodied leadership and cultures of care, with an emphasis on cultivating embodied leadership and embedding both relational care and collective wellbeing into the organizational practices of AFCS and OYF. To successfully achieve both of these goals, I focused my leadership in two discrete, interconnected areas. This included personal healing, as well as enlisting the expertise of a consultant to lead a collective care process for the team, aimed at identifying the most effective practices for sustaining wellbeing.

In 2024 I consulted with AFCS to support staff development efforts. As part of this work, and to build on and deepen an ongoing commitment to staff wellbeing, I engaged a consultant to lead a collective care plan design process. This initiative was designed to foster authentic connection and care among team members, surface colleagues' collective care needs, and reflect on how care practices were embedded in OYF's team culture. The process also sought to identify new opportunities to strengthen individual and collective care practices across the organization.

The consultant facilitated three sessions with the entire staff, along with six sessions that engaged the design team, all of which culminated in a set of shared commitments and themes connecting team members to one another and to the work. The sessions produced

recommendations for cultivating a long-term, sustainable culture of care among OYF colleagues. These were then placed on hold until I returned as a resident in June 2025.

Coming out of the design process, the AFCS team identified collective care as a sustained organizational priority and established shared rituals of joy, such as dancing, offering affirmations before convenings, and writing thank-you notes to celebrate colleagues' contributions. They also agreed to embrace an abundance mindset, move with an intention to rest during slower work seasons, and remain grounded in mutual love, support, and accountability, among other commitments.

Together, both my personal healing journey and my role codesigning an organization-level collective care plan were supported by a range of literary scholars that connected the personal to the professional. It is important, in this regard, to underscore that inner transformation is deeply tied to external impact and evolution because leaders' self-work replicates across organizational culture in ways that either promote or constrain psychological safety, trust, and ultimately wellbeing. Scholars like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and adrienne maree brown have illuminated the fractal relationship between individual healing and collective wellbeing, while Shawn Ginwright and Edgar Schein have connected these concepts to achieving and sustaining justice-centered efforts.

The work of Black feminist and scholar Audre Lorde, who is often credited with intersectional theory (Lorde, 1983)—the idea that there is no hierarchy in forms of oppression, but that they intersect to create a system of discrimination—offered the foundational premise of my inquiry into the relationship between our inner self and the outer world, specifically the idea that the personal is political. In *The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism*, Lorde (1984, p. 124) posited that suppressed emotions and unprocessed grief, particularly anger in response to

racism and injustice, require mechanisms for processing and metabolizing, lest they destroy the holder. According to Lorde (1984), these unprocessed feelings shape everything from perception to judgement, behavior, and choices. Lorde (1984) argued that speaking truth to emotions is an act of liberation.

Lorde's (1984) admonishments rang true and resonated as a deeply personal call to healing for me, as a Black woman leader in the social sector who had experienced personal grief due to the untimely passing of my parents, social angst due to the ousting of the first Black woman president at Harvard University during my tenure, and as a result of the second election of Donald Trump in 2024. The 2024 election was especially difficult to process because I did not experience it as an abnormality or aberration. On the contrary, it signified and reaffirmed abiding narratives about power, belonging, and the interlocked forms of oppression rooted in race and gender in the context of the United States. Coupled with the personal grief of losing my parents and the ousting of Claudine Gay at Harvard University, the moment cemented how quickly the progress of anyone who is not white or male can be questioned and uprooted and demonstrated how systems consistently recalibrate to maintain familiar hierarchies of caste (Wilkerson, 2020).

Without the opportunity to meaningfully process my grief, or carefully work through the social, economic, and political reality of Trump 2.0 as a Black woman leading a justice-oriented organization, unprocessed emotions could easily impact how I led and responded to conflict, urgency, and institutional power—and especially to racism and patriarchy. Lorde's (1984) scholarship was an important reminder that inner healing and transformation are a precondition of ethical, morally centered leadership. By redressing trauma and grief, leaders are better positioned to support and foster collective wellbeing at the organizational level because they are

more likely to create emotional sustainability, a prerequisite to engaging in transformative narrative-change work.

Building on the notion that interior work is foundational to outer transformation, scholar bell hooks extended this idea by adding *relational practice* to the work of transforming self and others using what she called a *love ethic*. hooks (2000) defined love as a discipline that includes an abiding commitment to mutual growth and accountability, coupled with a commitment to ending oppression and the domination of others. It is worth noting that hooks was not describing a sentimental idea of love, but rather a structural frame that shapes everything from how relationships are cultivated and sustained, to how power is formed and practiced. Viewed through an organizational and institutional frame, hooks (2000) offered a roadmap for practicing love through acts of transparency, reconciliation, and truth-telling, noting that these actions begin with the self and extend to our relationships. Moreover, according to hooks (2000), when love is a relational, collective practice, it creates psychological safety and fosters trust. In other words, it serves as relational infrastructure that promotes wellbeing because individuals feel safe to speak openly and engage in dialogue without fear—including across differences—and individuals are more willing to take risks. hooks (2000) posited that relational trust built on a love ethic functions as both a moral and operational precondition to driving transformative change in the world.

hooks' (2000) advice for practicing love as a relational ethic built on Lorde's (1984) call to know oneself, while connecting self-knowledge to collective growth. Together these ideas highlight how self-love manifests into and through our relationships. As a leader in the social sector, this idea was of critical importance because relationships are the currency that either drive or undermine organizational culture. Therefore, leaders must be aware of how their inner work is

impacting their relationships, in addition to the overall tenure of their relationships, as both factors drive how colleagues experience the workplace. For me, it was a reminder that individual healing is tied to organizational, and thus collective, wellbeing.

adrienne maree brown (2017) is most recognized for her scholarship on emergent strategy, which is based on the idea of *mimicry*, specifically the notion that solutions to the social challenges we face exist in nature, including in how the natural world heals itself. Importantly, in *Emergent Strategy* brown (2017) made the case for how inner work and relational work scale to impact system transformation. There, brown (2017) wrote about the concept of fractals:

How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale. The patterns of the universe repeat at scale. There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale... It was and is devastatingly clear to me that until we have some sense of how to live our solutions locally, we won't be successful at implementing a just governance system regionally, nationally, or globally... what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system. (pp. 52–53)

Applying brown's (2017) theory to organizations makes it clear that culture does not exist in the abstract and is instead a reflection of the wellbeing of an organization's leaders and constituents, or of the repeated relational patterns of its members. Therefore, if leaders and members are leading from or showing up rooted in fear and urgency, these patterns are reproduced throughout the organization. At the same time, leaders rooted in the love ethic called for by hooks (2000), or the self-love proclaimed by Lorde (1984), reinforce these sentiments—which show up as practices—throughout and across the organization.

This is an important consideration for leaders, particularly ones working to redress the historical pain and trauma associated with harmful narratives about Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth and communities, which exist at both a personal and societal level. Put another way, false narratives meant to diminish opportunities and lifetime outcomes for people of color in the United States have both a psychological and social impact on the people they are meant to harm. Therefore, engaging in this work with the aim to transform culture and policies over the long-term requires leaders to interrogate internalized oppression with the aim of disrupting how forces of patriarchy, racism, urgency, and even scarcity inform their leadership and interactions with team members. Doing so can spur relationships rooted in interdependence, abundance, belonging, and safety—tenets of a positive organizational culture. Not doing so fosters contempt as leaders draw from a well comprised of the very forces their organizations are seeking to dismantle. Most importantly, brown's (2017) scholarship serves as a bridge that connects the personal transformation Lorde (1984) and hooks (2000) argued for with the idea of cultural reproduction: the social process of transmitting values, beliefs, and norms across generations. This further signifies the importance of passing healing, love, wellbeing, and care onto future decedents, an infrastructural process that begins with an individual and that is imparted onto every space he, she, or they occupy.

While it is important for organizational leaders to employ the internal healing practices Lorde (1984), hooks (2000), and brown (2017) have argued for in their scholarship, it is equally important for leaders, particularly in the social sector, to connect this work with the mission of the organization to ensure deeper alignment and coherence between the personal and professional. The scholarship of Shawn Ginwright (2022) has aimed to integrate personal healing

and justice as central tenets of social transformation. In *The Four Pivots*, Ginwright (2022) connected these concepts through his mirror-versus-lens framework:

The lens helps us see systems of oppression. The mirror forces us to see ourselves. Too often in social justice work, we rely only on the lens. We critique systems, policies, and institutions, but we fail to examine how trauma and internalized oppression shape how we show up in the work. Healing justice requires us to do both. (p. 17)

Ginwright (2022) noted that, historically, movements for justice have been rooted in critiques of the external forces that drive systemic oppression, while leaders working toward transformation have lacked the understanding or willingness to examine how these same systems live within individuals and show up in their leadership and relational practices. By advocating for the mirror versus the lens, Ginwright (2022) was urging leaders to look inward in ways that foster an internal integration of healing and justice so that they operate simultaneously to foster coherence and harmony between their personal, professional, and political selves. This call for internal coherence resonated deeply with me as a leader working to transform harmful narratives rooted in racism and oppression.

Personally, I had experienced many of the narratives we were working to address as traumatic, and they had resulted in an emotional residue that clouded my judgement and discernment, resulting in an abiding distrust of systems and people in positions of power. Ginwright's (2022) call to engage in mirror work reminded me that leading justice work was a spiritual endeavor that required both deep personal care and a strong commitment to serving others, while supporting them to heal, so that collectively, we could transform the sector. Moreover, Ginwright's (2022) scholarship served as an important reminder that healing from oppression is critical for leaders working to advance social justice because it creates greater

spaciousness for dreaming, ideation, creativity, and transmutation, referring to the ability to turn pain into healing, and even joy. As a Black woman in the social sector, the ability to do these things was not only critical to leadership; it was also the precondition to thriving.

Finally, according to Schein (2016), leaders reinforce organizational culture through their actions, including how they show up, what they pay attention to, and what they value. This becomes especially transparent during times of duress or transition. Over time, what leaders model translates into implicit understandings of values, power, safety, and urgency. Given this, embodied leadership practices either reinforce or dismantle how oppression lives at the organizational level. Rituals that center wellbeing, reflection, systems of repair, and psychological safety are critical to promoting individual and collective wellbeing, beginning with leadership and transferring to colleagues throughout the organization. Furthermore, Schein's (2016) scholarship built on and highlighted the claims of Lorde (1984), hooks (2000), brown (2017), and Ginwright (2022) in that the self-work of leaders is critical to the health of organizations. Leaders cultivate trust or fear through their daily actions. As AFCS worked to dismantle harmful, traumatizing narratives, it was critical for me as a leader to hold this reality in order to uphold the sustainability of our shared work.

Taken together, these scholars individually and collectively have highlighted that achieving narrative transformation requires a deep and abiding commitment to inner work, rooted in healing from grief and forces of oppression, especially as a Black woman who lives and works at the intersection of systemic injustices. The scholarship of these authors collectively illustrates that inner healing work translates to relational integrity, which cultivates psychological safety. In turn, this fosters collaborative innovation, which is foundational to building a narrative infrastructure that reshapes frames and that ultimately influences policy. Collectively, these

scholars have made the case for embodied leadership as a precondition to building shared wellbeing and trust, which together are integral to shifting narratives and policies that impact outcomes for Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth, families, and communities.

Narrative Strategy Capacity and Distributed Leadership

Guiding RQs: (1) How does increased narrative fluency influence strategic action within justice-centered organizations? (2) What conditions support building durable narrative strategy skills across ecosystems? (3) How does distributed narrative leadership expand strategic influence?

The second area of transformation that this project focused on was titled “Narrative Strategy Capacity and Distributed Leadership.” This part of my theory of action aimed to strengthen narrative fluency, including deepening the skills and narrative capacity of staff within AFCS’s program, of community members across the national network, and of our young adult partners. Efforts to accomplish this important goal were rooted in the scholarship of several scholars, including George Lakoff (2002), Marshall Ganz (2009), Patricia Hill Collins (2017), John Gaventa (1982), and Hahrie Han (2014). Collectively, these scholars made the case that narrative capacity-building is not simply a communications strategy, but a field of practice positioned to impact the broader social sector.

According to these scholars, increasing the narrative fluency of staff, youth, and network members would better position AFCS to achieve its narrative change goals. The authors noted that spaces of shared learning promote greater field alignment and validity, which lead to a durable narrative ecosystem. This idea aligned deeply with AFCS’s approach to fostering learning across the field, specifically the biannual convenings that were organized around a shared learning agenda that transmitted lessons from the local, state, and national levels to spur impact and drive success with an emphasis on narrative strategy, change, and impact.

Additionally, the scholars posited that distributive narrative leadership is critical because it deepens strategic influence across a range of levels and power structures. This also aligned well with OYF's network-wide learning approach, as we convened leaders from the local, state, and national levels to transmit lessons and share best practices, including advancing narrative strategies. Learning across the various levels of the OYF national network, while working to drive narrative change, ensured the scalability of our work, in addition to its sustainability, due to the diverse field positionality of our many leaders. In other words, the national network was uniquely well-positioned to collectively drive a narrative change strategy, beginning with deep learning about moral frames and how they inform narratives.

As previously noted, Lakoff's (2002) scholarship on narratives focused on moral frames that shape people's reality, including what feels true or possible. Individuals use their frames to process information. Given this reality, according to Lakoff (2002), narrative fluency is about recognizing dominant frames and understanding how they influence meaning-making and logic, which informs values. Awareness of the relationship between values and frames is important to narrative change work because it enables strategists to apply a critical lens to the design of new, counter-narratives in order to ensure that they are both values-driven and proactive. At the same time, the cognitive awareness Lakoff (2002) was speaking to can lead to a narrative campaign that is rooted in moral principles and language choices that reinforce values and strategic messaging, while also building toward long-term impact rather than a short-term response.

Lakoff's (2002) theory about messaging and frames aligned with the training sessions our partners at FrameWorks Institute delivered to colleagues and to our network in September and October of 2025. Grounded in Lakoff's (2002) theory of frames, the sessions focused on deepening participants' understanding of mindsets, frames, narratives, and stories, while

exploring how to integrate these concepts into broader organizing and advocacy efforts using cultural strategies to transform the policies, practices, systems, and institutions that shape young people’s lives. The sessions explored questions like, how can we build narrative strategy into a broader advocacy and organizing effort to change the systems that affect young people? and how can we best contest the dominant narratives that perpetuate inequality and negatively affect the wellbeing of young people? By grounding their messages in moral principles and carefully selected language choices—which Lakoff (2002) called *frame coherence*—participants were supported to consider tactical strategies for long-term frame-building rather than short-term wins.

Notably internal frame coherence connected synergistically to the previous scholarship on embodied leadership and collective healing. Leaders working on narrative change must cultivate internal coherence to avoid reproducing negative morals and harmful messages, just as organizational leaders must heal to avoid reproducing harmful relational patterns and practices. While establishing narrative coherence and fluency are important foundational work, collective agency and organized action are critical to drive narrative change. This is where Marshall Ganz’s (2009) theory of public narrative entered the conversation (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Self, Us, Now



Source: Ganz, M. (2009). *What is public narrative: Self, us, and now* [Worksheet]. P. 2.

Building on Lakoff's (2002) moral framing of narratives, Ganz (2009) offered a path to collective mobilization. The *story of self*, *story of us*, and *story of now*, also known as aspects of *public narrative*, connect narratives and action. By beginning with a leader's story of self, experiences are transformed to purpose, and credibility is established. By connecting an individual's story to others—the story of us—shared identity and mutual purpose are built. The story of now anchors shared identity and mutual purpose in a sense of urgency by making the work current and time sensitive. From a strategy perspective, leaders grounded in Lakoff's (2002) theory establish narrative coherence and fluency and then leverage Ganz's (2009) theory to bring people together around shared identity, purpose, and collective action.

OYF's national infrastructure lends itself to a collective organizing approach organically through the various levels of engagement from leaders at the local, state, and national levels. As part of my strategic project, colleagues, young adult partners, and community leaders—who shared core morals, especially as they related to the value of young people—came together to cohere around key messages, while also working to design a collective strategy for narrative change. Alignment across the network was critical to meaningful participation and effective action. At the same time, the importance of narrative fluency and calibration around collective action aligned deeply with embodied leadership. Narrative fluency is important to interpretive coherence, and thereby confidence, which fosters political risk-taking, just as embodied leadership fosters psychological safety for relational risk-taking. In both cases, individuals are more willing to act when they feel seen, safe, affirmed, and aligned in their values and strategic approach to the challenges they face.

In a justice-centered organization, establishing fluency and collective action is necessary, but not sufficient. It is also critical to interrogate whose narratives are validated and trusted as

worthy. In the context of designing a narrative strategy to transform the policies, systems, and structures that serve as a barrier to opportunity for Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth, this interrogation is paramount. Scholar and Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins (2017) defined epistemic power as the authority to determine whose knowledge and narratives are considered credible, trustworthy, and worthy of engagement. Collins (2017) argued that dominant narratives are more than just cognitive frames. She suggested that they are ideological tools that serve to facilitate legitimacy. Narratives like that of the *welfare queen* or *super-predator* mainstream and normalize the inequality and marginalization of Black women and Black youth. To achieve epistemic justice, the people most impacted by injustice must be positioned with authority in ways that acknowledge and legitimize their knowledge, especially as it relates to framing counter-narratives aimed at redressing harmful messages. In other words, the people most impacted by negative narratives must be positioned to control the frames that Lakoff (2002) noted and that lie at the center of collective action promoted by Ganz (2009). This redistribution deepens authenticity and legitimacy while strengthening trust. Most importantly, it disrupts the cycle of reproducing narrative harm when the people most impacted lead in the design of new counter-narratives. In the context of the OYF, Collins's (2017) scholarship called for young adults to be the architects of narrative systems as a means to achieve justice. This call aligned deeply with OYF's values and approach, as young people had been key partners since the inception of the network.

Building on Collins's (2017) call for narrative justice, political sociologist John Gaventa (1982) brought a power analysis into the frame, noting the importance of understanding that narratives operate across both visible and invisible dimensions of power. According to Gaventa's (1982) power cube, there is: formal decision-making, also regarded as *visible power*; agenda-

setting, referred to as *hidden power*; and norms and internalized beliefs, called *invisible power*. Gaventa (2017) argued that the most powerful and enduring narratives operate at the invisible level of power, shaping what people believe. To address invisible power, narrative systems must coordinate across multiple spaces (both closed and open), across levels (local, state, and national), and across all three forms of power (from invisible to hidden and visible).

OYF was uniquely positioned to enact a broad and deep multi-pronged coordination strategy to interrogate narrative power given its investment in local, state, and national collaborative infrastructure, its coalitions within and outside the social sector, and its many partners and champions with influence across a range of areas. Colleagues, young adult partners, and community leaders could work together to identify the cultural assumptions undergirding current policies that were barriers to opportunity, while codesigning counter-narratives rooted in clear moral values aimed at shifting visible and invisible influence to bring about new, inclusive, and more expansive policies. Gaventa's (2017) frame was critical because it enabled OYF to examine invisible harm to ensure it was not reproduced in new, counter-narratives, while building and deepening the collective ability to analyze power and disrupt it accordingly.

Armed with a shared moral narrative frame, a path to collective mobilization, an abiding commitment to epistemic justice, and a willingness to interrogate invisible power, this work called for an expansion of influence—what scholar and political scientist Han (2014) called *distributed leadership*—to achieve its transformation goals. To bridge strategy and infrastructure, Han (2014) distinguished between *mobilizing* and *organizing*, noting that the former engages existing champions while the latter enlists new leaders with strategic capacity. Han's (2014) scholarship served to highlight how movements build people and or actors, particularly through establishing new partners, leaders and co-conspirators to expand the base. This connects to

Ganz's (2009) vision of organizing, which focuses on compelling a newly expanded base of partners, leaders, and co-conspirators to act together via shared values (e.g., public narrative). Together, Han (2014) and Ganz (2009) laid out a vision for how coordinated movement is possible. Guided by Han's (2014) scholarship, the newly expanded network of actors (e.g., new partner, leaders, and co-conspirators) serves as narrative infrastructure to grow influence by multiplying the number of people articulating shared values, communicating urgency, and recruiting others into action vs. efforts localized within a communications team.

Han's (2014) approach can yield three important benefits, framed as forms of expansion. The first benefit is *reach*, as more leaders activate frames across diverse audiences. The second benefit is *resonance*, which enables local leaders to adapt messages and narratives to specific contexts, a critical skill in the context of a network as geographically diverse as OYF's. Finally, there is *resilience*, the third benefit, because narrative capacity is not lost in the mix of turnover, burnout, or political backlash, which are all common in movement work. Importantly, Han's (2014) model of distributed leadership reinforced Lakoff's (2004) notion of coherent frames and Ganz's (2009) insight on mobilizing stories. At the same time, when distributed leadership is practiced with a commitment to justice and an analysis of power, it can achieve the goal of structural transformation.

In summary, these scholars collectively have made it clear that narrative fluency enhances clarity, durability, and coordination in ways that increase agency, urgency, center justice, redress power, and ensure shared accountability at multiple and diverse levels and layers of leadership, to expand influence across narrative ecosystems. The expanded influence enables justice-centered organizations, like AFCS and the OYF national network, to foster a collective

shared meaning, collaborative strategy, and ultimately new narratives, policies, and systems for Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth.

Movement Alignment and Collective Narrative Power

Guiding RQs: (1) How does narrative alignment across organizations strengthen collective strategic power? (2) What network conditions enable coordinated narrative amplification? (3) How do coalition structures influence movement-level narrative coherence?

The third area of transformation in my strategic project examined how OYF's narrative infrastructure scaled into coordinated movement-level power. Scale requires organizations to be connected in ways that enable shared meaning to travel via connections, while leveraging coalitions to institutionalize and sustain coordination over time. This area of research focused on the scholarship of Mark Granovetter (1973), Manuel Castells (2013), and John Kania and Mark Kramer (2011), who collectively offered an explanation that connected the dots around the ways that narrative ecosystems build collective, strategic power, amplify coordinated messages, and sustain coherence at the movement level.

Sociologist and scholar Mark Granovetter (1973) is regarded for his research and scholarship on social network theory, in addition to his observations on how structural influence is critical to how networks operate. According to Granovetter (1973), structural influence is expressed through acquaintances, or weak social ties, rather than through close, insular friendships. Weak ties serve as bridges between different kinds of social circles, enabling information, resources, opportunities, and more to be shared and exchanged. While dense ties generate trust and cohesion, weak ties foster connections, enabling spread, coordination, and reach. In narrative work, these connections are essential to strengthening narrative power, especially when organizations promote internal ties or close partner clusters—known as *bonding*

ties—to build or deepen internal coherence and trust. On the other hand, *bridging ties*—which transpire across organizations, sectors, and geographies—allow for shared frames to advance and synchronize across an ecosystem.

Granovetter's (1973) network theory was critical to OYF's narrative change work because efforts to deepen internal coherence and trust are a priority element of internal narrative change design sessions. The narrative strategy consultants co-led multiple sessions with the team both to build knowledge of narrative strategies and to achieve shared agreement on messaging. At the same time, the narrative change consultants pushed the team to foster bridging ties, including identifying organizations across the sector, beyond the sector, and around the United States, to serve as partners and champions in amplifying our agreed-upon key messages. Recently, the OYF team disseminated a narrative survey across the field designed to bridge ties with diverse organizations and expand its messages.

Additionally, Granovetter (1973) wrote about the network conditions that enable coordinated amplification. These conditions include sufficient bridging ties that permit messages to transcend organizational and sector silos, multiple bridges that are redundant so that message diffusion is not dependent on one broker or organization, and, finally, trusted connectors who translate narrative frames with deep integrity so that the message remains consistent and is not distorted as it travels.

In the context of OYF's narrative change work, these conditions were organically in place due to the collaborative nature of the work. Locally, communities worked across sectors and systems to improve outcomes for youth of color, while state coalitions implemented a similar approach to drive policy and advocacy efforts. At the national level, OYF's work had always been contingent upon deep partnerships and coalition-building, with the idea that it takes

many different actors, partners, and sectors to solve seemingly intractable issues. From various, diverse partners, to redundant bridges—referred to as *shared backbones* in its work—to trusted connectors, including bi-partisan leaders aligned around shared messages, Granovetter’s (1973) social network theory drove how OYF engaged in its work.

While Granovetter (1973) explained how messages spread via networks and structures, Castells (2013) illuminated how the shared meaning of messages translates to movement-level narrative power. According to Castells (2013), and in alignment with Collins (2017) and Gaventa (1982), struggle over meaning lives at the heart of narrative change work. Therefore, the locus of power exists with those who can shape interpretive frames across media ecologies. During a plenary on narrative change at the October convening in 2025, the President and CEO of FrameWorks Institute described this as *message flooding*. According to the FrameWorks Institute leader and Castells (2013), message flooding is the consistent repetition of frames and messages that regularly circulate across many nodes so that, ultimately, they become the default, accepted, uncontested way that everything from events to messages is understood.

The flooding of messages is critical to strengthening strategic and collective narrative power at the movement level because it transitions organizing from the individual organizational level to the coalition level, so that coalitions work across vast communication networks to oversaturate messages that cohere moral frames, building on Lakoff (2002). Additionally, coalitions seek to mobilize a broad and diverse set of actors and participants through shared, emotionally resonate stories, connecting to Ganz (2009). Ultimately, messages become so durable that on their own they remain both dominant and persistent through shared meaning-construction.

Castells (2013) also noted how coordination amplification occurs at the movement level through many voices, resulting in multi-nodal dissemination, cross-platform circulation (i.e.,

earned media, social media, cultural production, and institutional communication), and feedback loops that reinforce resonance. The collective impact of these actions is significant because they shape the interpretive environment and ultimately inform what becomes common sense and morally acceptable. An example of this at the movement level is the global pervasiveness of anti-Black racism. Anti-Black sentiments have been amplified and disseminated so broadly that young Black girls in Brazil, Columbia, Mexico, and the United States, to name a few countries, share similar stories, regardless of vast geographical differences, with OYF network members also experiencing racism and discrimination. Counter-messages and narratives that combat the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism are critical to redress in OYF's narrative work, both in the United States and, ultimately, around the world.

Finally, successful movements are built on coalition infrastructure and power gained from message flooding that fosters shared interpretative meaning. To ensure that narratives are durable and sustainable at the movement level, Kania and Kramer's (2011) collective impact frame offered important guidance. The five conditions of collective impact — "a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 38) — directly map to movement-level infrastructure, while enacting shared mechanisms that foster durability and sustainability. A common agenda helps set a north star for a movement. Continuous communication enables alignment and realignment over time, across differences, and among competing interests. It also brings about shared language and feedback loops that prevent messages from falling apart or from getting lost in the noise of the broader movement. Mutually reinforcing activities reduce fragmentation by supporting coalitions to play different roles based on their expertise and field positionality, while still remaining connected to an underlying shared frame.

Altogether, Granovetter (1973), Castells (2013), and Kania and Kramer (2011) made a compelling case for how narrative alignment strengthens collective strategic power at the movement level. The knowledge produced by these scholars has deepened our understanding of cross-cluster coordination (Granovetter, 1973), advanced knowledge of how actors shape meaning via message flooding (Castells, 2013), and fostered comprehension of how coalitions institutionalize coherence through the five conditions of collective impact. This work requires bridging ties, multi-platform and nodal dissemination strategies, and feedback loops for resonance, durability, and sustainability. Moreover, these scholars built on Lakoff's (2002) case for cognitive moral frames, Ganz's (2009) mobilization of shared stories, agency, and urgency, and Han's (2014) argument for the importance of distributive leadership. Collectively, Granovetter (1973), Castells (2013), and Kania and Kramer (2011) have demonstrated how all of the aforementioned narrative capacities scale from organizational practices to ecosystem power at the movement level.

Youth-Led Narrative Leadership and Agency

Guiding RQs: (1) How does youth decision-making authority shape narrative legitimacy and influence? (2) What impact does youth-led storytelling have on cultural discourse? (3) How do intergenerational power shifts affect narrative transformation?

The fourth and final area of focus of my theory of action was youth-led narrative leadership and agency, which explored how young people are supported to move from authorship to agency to institutional disruption. Scholarship produced by Paulo Freire (1970), Shawn Ginwright (2018), and Sara Ahmed (2012) undergirded this focus area, shaping the key ideas in this section, beginning with narrative legitimacy and transformative power.

Youth-centered narrative transformation does more than invite young people to share stories. Building on the scholarship of Collins (2017), Gaventa (1982), and Ganz (2009), it seeks to shift who has the authority to define what is valuable, whose knowledge is legitimate, and how power transforms across systems, institutions, and generations. The research and knowledge produced by Freire (1970), Ginwright (2018), and Ahmed (2012) has illuminated how youth decision-making authority establishes values and produces legitimacy in ways that shape discourse and culture, including intergenerational shifts in power, and ultimately narrative transformation. Freire (1970) first established youth as agents and managers of their own knowledge, or as *epistemic agents*. Ginwright (2018) brought this concept into a contemporary frame via his healing-centered justice framework, while Ahmed (2012) highlighted the friction systems and institutions experience when norms are disrupted and authentic power shifts occur.

It is useful to begin with Freire (1970) and his central claim that oppression is sustained through material constraints and control over meaning-making. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) critiqued *banking education* as an oppressive act in which teachers deposit information into passive, obedient students while stifling creativity and mandating the status quo. Freire (1970) wrote:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. (p. 72)

This approach to learning is dehumanizing because it treats students as empty vessels and stifles creative inquiry aimed at nurturing the mind, heart, and souls of young people. Instead of this inhumane approach to learning, Freire (1970) argued that students should be co-creators of knowledge through dialogue and praxis, or reflection and action. Freire (1970) clarified that

youth decision-making authority shapes narrative legitimacy because it places young people as agents in identifying and designing messages that are relevant and meaningful to them. When youth name the problem, define its causes, and set the terms of knowledge, this structurally transforms epistemic power. In other words, Freire (1970) was advocating for youth to be the narrators of their reality, and in doing so, to be regarded as the knowledge holders, or experts, of their lived experience, and therefore positioned to analyze and guide strategies aimed at solutions.

Connecting this back to Collins's (2017) argument about epistemic justice, both scholars called for a redistribution of interpretative authority, making young people authentic owners of knowledge grounded in the power and authority of their lived experiences. This view also connects with Lakoff's (2004) framing logic; when youth shape the frames, they shape what is moral and what is considered common sense about who they are and about safety, education, and belonging. Youth transition from *message carriers* to *meaning-makers*, or, as Ruja Benjamin (2024) suggested, to *story-makers* who set both agenda and strategy.

Ginwright (2018) built on Freire's (1970) frame with a contemporary update shaped by racial capitalism, trauma, and violence, which was rooted in a healing-centered culturally based intervention. As previously noted, OYF partnered with Ginwright, whose framework of Healing-Centered Engagement (HCE) guided the network's approach to individual and collective healing. Ginwright (2018) emphasized that healing is inseparable from agency and political power. Given this connection, HCE begins from an asset-based perspective, asking young people, "What is right with you?" and "What are your dreams?" These questions operate in contrast to deficit-based inquiries that are focused on trauma, an approach typically used to understand the lived experiences of youth of color. At the same time, this approach directly counters the banking

education model Freire (1970) examined. Most importantly, the HCE framework asserts that when young people act, they reclaim their power, and this demonstration of agency is itself an act of healing. Therefore, healing is not only personal but also political: it shifts youth from passive recipients of services to active co-creators of change. Finally, HCE is grounded in community. For young people and communities of color, healing happens collectively; it transforms individuals, families, and entire communities through solidarity, shared purpose, and structural change. Collectively, community healing is both a lived reality and a form of resistance that serves to counter the dominant myth of individualism rooted in white supremacy that functions to deny the role of interdependence in wellbeing. Given its alignment with OYF's values and network beliefs, HCE was an integral element of this capstone project and served to reinforce healing practices, especially with our young adult partners.

Ginwright's (2018) HCE frame was clear that movements can reproduce urgency, harm, and trauma if they are not healing centered. In order to sustain liberation work, movements, just like work with young people, must center inner healing that is paired with Freire's (1970) emphasis on praxis, so that youth are supported to experience meaningful reflection and action born out of deeper, personal healing. This healing process enables youth-led storytelling to function as a cultural intervention that rehumanizes young people and that locates structural harm at its root: in the systems meant to serve them.

Healing is also future-oriented, rooted in dignity and values that foster belonging. Ginwright (2018), similar to Ganz (2009), made it clear that storytelling is leadership, as stories are the bridge between values, emotions, and collective action. Finally, Ginwright's (2018) scholarship suggested that authority matters because it changes the function of storytelling. Rather than being performative or extractive, young people determine the purpose, frame, and

use of stories, including what is shared and what is sacred. In the context of AFCS's culture of care, and rooted in the scholarship of Lorde (1984), hooks (2000), brown (2017), and Schein (2016), young people who were supported to speak their truths, and OYF's healing-centered culture, enabled adult partners to metabolize that truth into strategy, collectively shifting narratives from deficit and harm to dignity and agency.

Finally, Ahmed's (2012) scholarship highlighted how intergenerational power shifts confront institutional walls and expose invisible power. To ensure authentic transformation, organizations, institutions, and youth-serving systems have to wrestle with this reality in ways that lead to authentic change. According to Ahmed (2012), power is maintained through norms that appear neutral but are challenged when intergenerational power shifts threaten institutional comfort, authenticity, and control. Youth narrative leadership disrupts what is said, who says it, and what must change in response to critiques from young people. Organizations and institutions are forced to grapple with new definitions of harm, safety, accountability, and success, and to codesign new processes and procedures which ensure that youth voice carries authority to foster transformation. These kinds of changes can be met with backlash as invisible power, noted by Gaventa (1982), comes to be challenged. However, according to Ahmed (2012), narrative change only becomes transformative when it alters and completely dismantles internalized assumptions and who has authority. Simply put, intergenerational power shifts require governance, and organizations must enact systems to ensure that accountability and repair are baked into operational procedures. As Schein (2016) noted, leaders and institutions reflect their culture through what they reward and tolerate. Therefore, in Ahmed's (2012) view, youth authority is real when organizational routines, incentives, and decision-making processes reorganize with and for young adults.

In conclusion, these scholars demonstrated that youth narrative transformation is a progression from legitimacy to healing-centered culturally based interventions to governance change. The work at Aspen OYF has always demonstrated an abiding commitment to the redistribution of authorship and meaning-making power by promoting alternative frames and intergenerational power-building aimed at transforming systems, institutions, policies, and narratives. In fact, the work has been governed by the belief that young people are the protagonists of their own narratives. In the past, this belief has been demonstrated by investing in everything from youth technology grants in 2014 to healing-centered youth organizing in 2021.

To conclude this section on research, these scholars have collectively made it clear that embodied leadership and a culture of care create the enabling conditions that make narrative change work possible. From Lorde (1984) to hooks (2000), brown (2017), Ginwright (2022), and Schein (2016), it is clear that when leaders commit to inner healing, they promote relational integrity and reduce the likelihood that grief, urgency, and internalized oppression will govern organizational or institutional wellbeing. Self-work is relational infrastructure—both love as discipline and care as practice—that strengthens psychological safety and trust. This process enables colleagues and young people alike to speak their truth and to be regarded as agents of knowledge who are able to take risks and transmute pain and progress into learning and transformation.

Essentially, this Research of Knowledge for Action highlighted that embodied leadership, the first transformation in my theory of action, is the root system or garden that creates the conditions for everything that follows. In the context of my strategic project, embodied leadership shifted organizational practices from being extractive and fear-based to being values-driven with aligned, shared care practices that were fractal and that expanded from leadership to

the organization to the national OYF network. As a leader, signaling a commitment to repair and collaborative care strengthens the collective readiness necessary to engage in narrative strategy, distributed leadership, movement alignment, and youth-led narrative power. Most importantly, narrative transformation requires leaders, organizations, and institutions to be capable of holding grief and vision together. This capacity is built, first and foremost, through embodied healing and collective care.

Theory of Action

As OYF worked to achieve the goals of its new strategic plan, transforming narratives served as a cross-cutting lever of impact across every priority area. Narratives shape public imagination, influence funding, inform policy decisions, and determine which young people are seen as deserving of opportunity. Given that dominant narratives about Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth have historically been rooted in deficit, scarcity, and criminalization, shifting these frames is essential to achieving long-term systems change. Narrative transformation is a cultural, relational, and structural strategy aimed at reshaping how society defines value, belonging, and opportunity. For OYF to influence public discourse, strengthen coalitions, and advance policy change, it needed to intentionally cultivate the conditions that make durable narrative change possible.

With this vision in mind, the theory of action in Table 1 outlined the transformations required to achieve meaningful, impactful, and sustainable narrative change. My TOA posited that building narrative power begins with embodied leadership and a culture of care that fosters trust and psychological safety. Next, it expands through strengthened narrative fluency and distributed leadership across the ecosystem. Then, narrative power is scaled through coordinated movement alignment and collective amplification. Finally, my TOA culminated in youth-led

narrative leadership that redistributes meaning-making authority, noting that this last phase is ongoing and iterative. Together, these four transformations create the relational, strategic, and structural conditions necessary to shift harmful dominant narratives and build sustainable, movement-level influence capable of shaping discourse, policy, and generational outcomes.

Table 1 *Theory of Action: Conditions for Transformative Narrative Change*

Transformation	If we... (strategies)	Outputs (what is produced)	Outcomes (what changes, or conditions measured)	In order to... (ultimate outcomes, contribution level)
1. Embodied leadership and culture of care	Cultivate embodied leadership and embed relational care and collective wellbeing into organizational practice	Wellbeing rituals, leadership reflection practices, conflict repair systems, psychological safety agreements	Psychological safety, trust, staff resilience, organizational readiness for narrative work	A resilient, values-aligned organizational culture capable of sustaining transformative narrative strategy
2. Narrative strategy capacity and distributed leadership	Strengthen narrative fluency and strategic capacity across staff, partners, and community leaders	Narrative trainings, shared frameworks, strategic tools, cross-sector partnerships	Narrative fluency, strategic framing skill, distributed leadership in narrative initiatives	Durable ecosystem-wide narrative strategy capacity capable of influencing public meaning-making
3. Movement alignment and collective narrative power	Coordinate narrative strategy across the OYF ecosystem	Asset maps, shared narrative agendas, collaboration structures, coordinated messaging systems	Narrative coherence, cross-sector trust, amplified collective influence	Coordinated movement-level narrative power capable of shaping discourse and policy environments
4. Youth-led narrative leadership and agency	Center young adults as designers and leaders of narrative strategy	Youth-led campaigns, leadership development, decision-making authority, intergenerational strategy spaces	Youth agency, influence in public discourse, sustained leadership pathways	Intergenerational narrative leadership that shifts cultural legitimacy and power toward youth

Note. Author's own work.

Chapter 3: Description, Evidence, and Analysis of the Strategic Project

Description of the Strategic Project (What and How)

Although I began my residency with AFCS on June 30, 2025, and it was scheduled to end on April 30, 2026, it is critical to note that prior to my resident status, during my first and second year in the Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.) program, I supported AFCS with a few organizational initiatives, including staff development, strategy design, and national learning. Moreover, prior to my tenure in the Ed.L.D. program, I worked with AFCS for several years. This context is important because joining as a resident in June of 2025 enabled me to hit the ground running in many ways since my relationships with colleagues and partners were in place, my understanding of the organization and its culture were fully formed, and I arrived with a clear vision of how to drive my strategic project forward in ways that could leverage the many attributes and resources of the organization.

With this context in mind, the following strategic project description, and subsequent analysis section, spanned from July 1, 2025, through March 31, 2026. However, the activities, especially the movement alignment and expanding youth authority (i.e., the youth voice narrative change project), were ongoing and continued into the summer and fall of 2026, due to the long-term nature of these change efforts. The expanded timeline aligned strategically with my ongoing tenure at AFCS, as I would remain with the organization beyond my residency, to serve as a senior leader. Given this context, the following project description mostly focuses on Phase I and Phase II of my TOA, with a light touch on Phases III and IV, due to the long-term nature of the latter phases.

The overall purpose of my strategic project was to create both the relational and structural conditions necessary to shift harmful dominant narratives and harness durable, sustainable,

movement-level narrative power. My long-term vision was to transform harmful and toxic narratives about opportunity youth, specifically Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth, into new narratives that reflected the wisdom, vibrancy, resiliency, beauty, and light inherent in every young person, so that, ultimately, policies and laws would be changed to improve generational outcomes for youth, families, and communities of color.

My project was grounded in the scholarship and research outlined in the preceding literature review and aimed to translate theory into practice by framing narrative transformation as a developmental process. The project began with a focus on my inner healing, which served to improve both my leadership capacity and ability to more deeply support my colleagues, particularly through the collective care plan that was formed in 2024 but was not brought to the fore of AFCS's work until the launch of my residency in 2025. Next, my project focused on deepening the narrative fluency of my colleagues to ensure that their knowledge and skills related to narrative change would grow in ways that fostered the long-term goals of this project. Then, this project focused on organizational and ecosystem-level narrative capacity-building, all ultimately aimed at centering young adult partners as the architects of the narratives that shape their lives and futures.

To accomplish this goal, the project was organized into four developmental phases, each designed to lay a foundation that bolstered and supported the subsequent efforts. The phases included some overlap, reflecting a core insight from the research: that narrative transformation is not exactly linear; it requires ongoing cycles of healing, learning, reflection, coordination, proximate leadership, and action. The primary focus of my project began with myself, then spread into AFCS as an initial site of learning and capacity-building, and then extended outward to the OYF national network, and ultimately to the broader Opportunity Youth movement,

including the young adults whose voices and visions were at the heart of this work and of everything we did and do at AFCS.

My strategic project was comprised of four phases: the foundational phase, the capacity-building phase, the ecosystem-building phase, and the generative leadership and authority phase.

Table 2 outlines the project design and goals.

Table 2

Project Design and Goals

Phase	Timeline	TOA area of focus	Goals
Phase I: Foundation building	July 2025– January 2026	Embodied leadership and culture of care	To cultivate embodied leadership practices rooted in personal healing and internal coherence that enhanced my ability, capacity, and readiness to lead narrative change To embed relational care and collective wellbeing into the organizational culture of AFCS through shared rituals, agreements, and sustained commitments To deepen psychological safety and relational trust as foundational experiences across the team, enabling colleagues to speak openly, take risks, and engage across differences To align organizational culture with OYF’s core values and the Narrative System for Our Future so that internal practices reflected the beliefs the OYF national movement sought to advance externally To deepen organizational values, resiliency, and the culture of wellbeing to enable and deepen colleagues’ ability to engage in transformative narrative strategy over the long term

Table 2, continued

Phase	Timeline	TOA area of focus	Goals
Phase II: Capacity building	October 2025 –June 2026	Narrative strategy capacity and distributed leadership	To deepen narrative change fluency across AFCS staff, OYF community partners, and young adult leaders so that participants could recognize dominant frames, articulate moral values, and design proactive counter-narratives To build durable and sustainable narrative strategy capacity across the OYF national network and ecosystems through shared frameworks, strategic tools, and a common learning agenda that transmitted lessons across the local, state, and national levels To foster distributed narrative leadership by equipping leaders throughout the network to serve as narrative designers and architects within their own organizations, communities, and coalitions To center epistemic justice by positioning the knowledge and interpretive authority of those most impacted by harmful narratives—particularly Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth—at the core of narrative strategy design To expand the strategic influence of the OYF network by expanding cross-sector partnerships and bridging relationships that extended narrative reach beyond the existing ecosystem
Phase III: Ecosystem coordination	February 2026– Nove mber 2027	Movement alignment and collective narrative power	To achieve narrative coherence across the Opportunity Youth ecosystem by coordinating shared narrative agendas among local collaboratives, state coalitions, and national partners To strengthen collective strategic power through coordinated message flooding that saturated media ecologies and shaped the interpretive environment across platforms and publics To build and sustain bridging ties across sectors, geographies, and issue areas to ensure aligned narratives traveled beyond organizational, sector, coalitions, and issue-area silos to reach broad and diverse audiences To institutionalize coalition-level coordination through continuous communication, shared measurement, and feedback loops that sustained narrative alignment over time To deepen OYF’s position as a network comprised of coordinated movement-level force capable of shaping public discourse and influencing policy environments on behalf of opportunity youth

Table 2, continued

Phase	Timeline	TOA area of focus	Goals
Phase IV: Generative leadership and authority	January 2026– July 2027	Youth-led narrative leadership and agency	To center young adults as designers, decision-makers, and leaders of narrative strategy—not simply as story contributors—so that youth held authentic authority over framing, meaning-making, and resource allocation To support youth-led narrative projects with resources to enable youth to reframe identity, produce alternative cultural symbols, and shift public discourse from deficit-based to dignity, healing-centered, love-based narratives To embed healing-centered engagement practices into all youth partnerships to ensure that storytelling processes were asset-based, non-extractive, and rooted in collective wellbeing To foster intergenerational power shifts by creating governance structures, decision-making processes, and accountability mechanisms that reorganized organizational routines with and for young adults To connect youth-led narrative efforts to the broader movement-level strategy, ensuring that local projects were amplified across the national network and contribute to ecosystem-wide narrative transformation

Note. Author’s own work.

As noted, I began my residency with AFCS on Monday, June 30, 2025. As a returning team member, I felt acclimated to the culture of the program, its priority work areas, and the objectives of my role: specifically, to create the conditions to lead narrative change work and, ultimately, the design of a narrative change agenda. The project was organized into four phases, and each phase aligned with my TOA. Every phase also overlapped with the others so that learning and implementation were developmental and integrated in ways that informed each new phase. Altogether, the phases generated rich and meaningful learning for me, beginning with embodied leadership and a culture of care.

Phase I, Foundation Building: Embodied Leadership and a Culture of Care (July 2025–January 2026)

The key activities in this phase focused on centering and cultivating the necessary relational and cultural infrastructure to sustain narrative change work overtime. Importantly, this phase began with my own engagement in personal healing and reflective leadership, specifically through enlisting the expertise of a professional coach. As part of our work together, we focused on healing practices, on achieving my fullest form of self-expression, and on completing a non-traditional 360-degree review. The review brought together eight of my closest and most trusted companions, inviting them to share reflections on my personal and professional growth and wellbeing within a spiritual frame, differentiating the feedback from a traditional 360-degree assessment. During this time, I also began working with a therapist. Our sessions focused on healing from ancestral burdens, including calling my ancestors together and collectively releasing our pain so that I could experience both greater internal spaciousness and move closer to my most healed and highest self.

While this inner work was taking place, I revisited the recommendations of the collective care plan that was designed in 2024 with an external consultant. Developing the plan included establishing a planning team, codesigning three full-staff sessions and six design team sessions focused on surfacing the team's collective care needs, and strengthening authentic connections among colleagues. Most importantly, the sessions produced a set of recommendations, including shared wellbeing rituals—such as affirmations before convenings, communal rest and reflection, and celebratory practices rooted in love and joy—that I began to implement as part of my residency. It included partnering with the AFCS team to codify norms, mutual care commitments, and expand our seasonal work rhythms (including closing AFCS for two to three weeks during the holiday season). Water cooler dates were added to the work calendar, every

team member wrote personal letters of affirmation to every colleague at our January 2026 retreat, and we came together to celebrate birthdays, weddings, growing families, and other milestones throughout my residency.

Prior to my residency, AFCS colleagues participated in the Clifton Strengths Finder Assessment (Gallup, 2026), which resulted in several team members scoring high in WOO, which stands for *winning people over*. Individuals with high levels of WOO are described as extraverted and enjoy building rapport with others, including connecting with strangers. They are charismatic, high energy, and natural at building a positive culture. To connect learning from the assessment to our team culture, I established a WOO Team in 2024. One year later, during my residency, I invited two colleagues from the WOO Team to serve as chairs and co-lead the implementation of the collective care plan. This act on my part was important because it created a through-line from the plan to the culture bearers of our organization, while supporting them to strategically and thoughtfully bring the elements of the collective care plan to the fore of our shared work.

Throughout this phase, activities were aligned with OYF's core values of equity, justice, collaboration, and love, and rooted in the beliefs of the Narrative System for Our Future (Sen et al., 2022; see Figure 4)—including interdependence, abundance, belonging, safety, dignity, and freedom to thrive—ensuring that the culture I was working to build and deepen internally with my colleagues reflected the vision we sought to advance externally. This phase also included the design of collective norms to foster psychological safety and support conflict repair systems. This was all aimed at deepening relational trust and psychological safety across AFCS's organizational infrastructure.

It is worth noting that while this work was unfolding an incident occurred that put relational trust, psychological safety, and my ability to meaningfully support staff through discomfort to the test. In December of 2025 a senior colleague reached out to share that a long-term partner had spoken to her disrespectfully, questioning both her credentials and her position of leadership within the organization. Given that the partner in question had worked with AFCS for several years and had both produced a significant body of work and garnered a great deal of respect and tenure, the exchange brought both the partnership and our shared work into question. However, from the outset of learning about the exchange my heart was centered on understanding how my colleague experienced the exchange, both on validating her experience and soliciting her preference on the best path forward. After checking in with the Executive Director, we both agreed that it was critical to cut ties with the long-term partner given our enduring values of mutual respect and love. It felt critical to consistently hold partners, colleagues, and close friends—including funders—of AFCS to the values of the organization, while ensuring that staff feel consistently heard, supported, respected, and valued.

Overall, the incident served to deepen trust with my colleague, while increasing her sense of safety and wellbeing. Moreover, these sentiments spilled over into other areas of the organization and into our shared work, including onto the WOO Team, which she officially joined after the incident was resolved. According to the colleague, she was committed to fostering and deepening a greater sense of trust and connection across the team because AFCS “lives its values” (personal communication, February 6, 2026).

Phase II, Capacity Building: Narrative Strategy Capacity and Distributed Leadership (October 2026–June 2027)

Key activities shifted in Phase II to strengthening narrative fluency and strategic capacity across AFCS staff, OYF community partners, and young adult leaders. Central to this effort was

establishing a partnership with the FrameWorks Institute, which delivered narrative strategy training sessions in September of 2025 focused on deepening participants' understanding of mindsets, frames, narratives, and stories, grounded in Lakoff's (2002) scholarship on moral framing. To complement this work, I enlisted the expertise and consulting support of two narrative strategists to lead internal team design sessions aimed at building shared narrative fluency and achieving collective agreement on key counter-messages. To aid in this work, I partnered with the narrative consultants to establish a Design Team to co-design learning sessions for the larger staff, community leaders, and young adult partners.

During this phase I also focused on the transmission of learning across the national network, specifically through our biannual convenings, which I was tasked with designing twice a year to drive learning and deepen impact. I organized the October 2025 convening in Aspen, Colorado around a shared learning agenda that connected lessons from the local, state, and national levels to stories of collective impact, effective education pathways, and policy wins rooted in data and advocacy. I also partnered with colleagues to focus the learning agenda on using narrative frameworks, strategic tools, and messaging guides rooted in Lakoff's (2002) moral framing logic and Ganz's (2009) public narrative methodology. Given my strategic project, I worked with the narrative change consultants to ensure that learning sessions at the convening included a deep dive into narrative fluency with community leaders (known as site leads in the OYF network). I also codesigned a general breakout session for the network on narrative change, and the FrameWorks Institute led a session on framing.

During the convening I moderated a plenary on narrative change that invited the audience to identify new narratives for opportunity youth. The most prominent themes identified were *community, love, hope, abundance, and joy*, sentiments that spoke to a shared belief in the power

working under my guidance who were deeply familiar with broader narrative ecosystem and infrastructure.

During this phase I designed a narrative survey and deployed it across the field to bridge ties with diverse organizations and to expand coordinated messaging. Building on this effort I supported a few communities across the network to share narrative change agendas with local collaborative partners, including our colleagues in Los Angeles at the Alliance for Children's Rights and our partners in Boston at the Private Industry Council. This work also leveraged state coalitions, including the Texas Opportunity Youth Network, led by my Aspen colleague, who was coordinating efforts to bring state-level leaders together to codesign a narrative strategy meant to inform Texas state policy. In California, the California Opportunity Youth Network was using narrative strategy to transform postsecondary policies for opportunity youth. Additionally, national partners, including organizations like the FrameWorks Institute, Jobs for the Future, and PolicyLink, were working closely to achieve the message coherence and amplification that Castells (2013) identified as critical to shaping interpretive environments.

While this phase aimed to include multi-nodal dissemination strategies across earned media, social media, cultural production, and institutional communication channels to achieve message flooding across platforms, these efforts had not yet unfolded, as they required a more developed narrative change strategy and coordinated movement-level infrastructure. Over the next few months, to sustain coordination over time, I planned to partner across the national network and broader movement to promote continuous communication channels and feedback loops across coalitions, reflecting Kania and Kramer's (2011) emphasis on continuous communication as a condition of collective impact. Finally, this phase ultimately included shared measurement systems which I planned to use to track narrative coherence and cross-sector trust

and to amplify collective influence at the movement level. Again, this phase was the least developed of all four phases given the time it takes to complete these efforts.

Phase IV, Generative Leadership and Authority: Youth-Led Narrative Leadership and Authority (February 2026–July 2027 and Beyond)

The fourth and final phase of my strategic project centered on youth-led narrative leadership and agency. As a structural intervention in narrative authority, I awarded three \$5,000 grants to young adult partners to design and lead narrative change projects in their communities, positioning youth as agenda-setters and resource holders in the tradition of Freire's (1970) scholarship on praxis. Thanks to funding aimed at advancing narrative change across the OYF national network, the awards served as a timely resource to expand the reach and impact of my strategic project.

The projects our young adult partners chose reflected Ginwright's (2018) vision of healing-centered narrative production. Youth were not simply describing harm; they were reframing identity, producing alternative symbols, and shaping cultural meaning. This also aligned with Ginwright's (2018) argument that transformative youth agency is connected to healing and creativity. Connecting to Lakoff (2004), each project activated new frames. Building on Han (2014) and Ganz (2009), the grant awards modelled distributed leadership as young adult partners were decentralized narrative architects working to strengthen durable ecosystems by creating new narratives that would be embedded in multi-nodes across communities and broadly across the national network. Also, the grants connected with Ahmed (2012) in that youth were being supported to exercise resource authority, and AFCS was responding to youth-defined priorities, ultimately signifying that authentic youth-led narrative leadership transformed and redefined who controlled resources, who defined meaning, and who shaped culture.

To ensure that grants to young adult partners were fairly disseminated, I supported the OYF Youth Team in designing a grant application that clearly laid out engagement criteria. It called for at least 1 year of engagement with the OYF national network, coupled with attendance at two national convenings. The criteria also included participation in the OYF Funder Leadership Council, which included a group of young leaders representing communities across the national network who partnered with me to codesign both the national convening agendas and to co-lead technical assistance across the national network, with an emphasis on engaging philanthropy in shared learning. After disseminating the application to the national network, we received interest from five young people. This resulted in three applications, noting that one formerly unhoused fellow learned that he had been accepted into a doctoral program after expressing an interest in applying, and another young woman shared that she had too much on her plate in light of the current administration's remigration efforts, which were directly impacting her family and community.

Additionally, while no direct coaching was offered to current and former youth fellows to complete the application, I did host a Q&A session for all young leaders and their adult allies to ensure clarity of information and a shared understanding of the application criteria and grant deliverables. I received three applications. The youth-led projects spanned from postsecondary institutional transformation in Montana, led by a young African-American woman; to culturally affirming fashion design that promoted positive messages about Black identity, led by a young African American woman in Minneapolis; to community storytelling focused on grief and resistance in the Latine community in Los Angeles, led by a Latine young person who identified as non-binary.

From the inception of OYF, healing-centered engagement practices had been embedded into all youth partnerships to ensure that storytelling processes remained asset-based, non-extractive, and rooted in dignity, consistent with Ginwright's (2018) framework. To honor this commitment, colleagues and I worked with young adult partners to set the terms of what our work together looked like, including paying young people for their time, and at the same level as professional consultants. The staff and I ensured that meeting times were set around the availability of young people managing school and work, and we invited adult allies to attend trainings on adultism, designed to create better synergy between youth and adult ideation and implementation.

These commitments, and many more, were baked into the design of the youth voice narrative change grants, and across all of our youth work at AFCS. At the same time, OYF had demonstrated an abiding commitment to hosting intergenerational strategy spaces where young adults co-designed everything, including narrative strategy alongside staff, community leaders, and coalition partners. I partnered with my colleague and supported him in overseeing the youth program design structures, organizational routines, incentives, and processes with and for young adults, as Ahmed's (2012) scholarship urged.

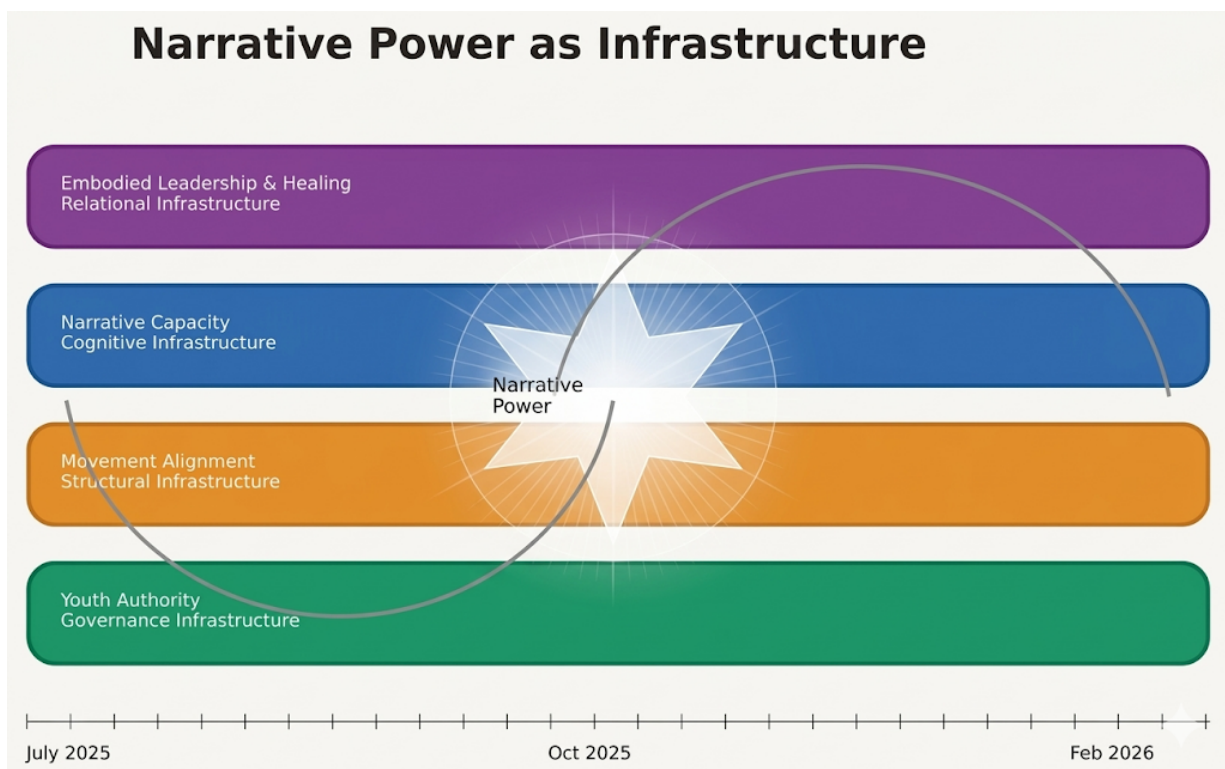
Given that I planned to stay at AFCS in my current role after my residency ended, future-facing work in this phase included deepening youth decision-making authority across all of our work at the organization beyond its current iteration, embedding accountability and repair mechanisms into operational procedures to sustain authentic youth authority, and designing strategies to navigate the institutional friction that accompanies genuine power shifts related to youth-led change. Finally, I ensured that the youth-led narrative projects would be connected to

the broader ecosystem strategy, so that local efforts were amplified across the national network as part of the movement-level agenda.

Taken together, these activities reflected the developmental nature of my strategic project. Each phase created conditions that enabled the next, moving from personal and organizational healing to network-wide capacity and fluency, and then onto ecosystem-level coordination, followed by the redistribution of narrative authority to the young people whose lives and futures were most at stake. The overlapping timelines (see Figure 7) underscored that this work was not sequential but iterative; healing, learning, coordination, and youth-led action operated as concurrent, mutually reinforcing processes that together created the relational and structural conditions necessary for durable, sustainable, movement-level narrative power.

Figure 7

Narrative Power as Infrastructure



Note. Generated using OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.4) large-language model (<https://chat.openai.com/chat>).

Evidence to Date on the Impact of the Strategic Project

This section evaluates the progress on the stated objectives of each phase of the TOA by examining both outputs (what was implemented) and outcomes (what changed as a result). The evidence is drawn from implementation artifacts, survey data, and observed shifts in practice across the organization and network. Together, these data assess the degree to which each phase advanced from early development toward more embedded and durable forms of practice and structure.

Phase I, Embodied Leadership and a Culture of Care

Objective: To cultivate embodied leadership and embed relational care and collective wellbeing into organizational practice in order to establish the conditions necessary to engage in narrative change.

Findings: Overall, Phase I established strong relational infrastructure but revealed a need to formalize learning systems (see Table 3). Most notably, using Garvin et al.'s (2008) learning organization framework to assess AFCS's organizational culture, when asked which of the three organizational building blocks needed the most improvement, 100% of the team selected *learning processes and practices*, signaling unanimous agreement and clarity, given that no one selected *supportive learning environment* or *leadership*. These findings inverted what Garvin et al. (2008) found in most organizations, where leadership ranks highly but learning and culture are in disarray. Arguably the most difficult conditions—trust, safety, tolerance for risk, and openness—were in place within and across AFCS. Importantly, we had an opportunity to further formalize our processes, including routines for reflection, documenting knowledge, and cross-team learning facilitation.

Table 3*Phase I Outputs and Outcomes*

Outputs	Outcomes (Survey data: n = 9)
• Three full-team collective care sessions • Six design team sessions to co-create a care framework • Shared collective care commitments and team norms • Integration of rituals of reflection and connection • Establishment of psychological safety agreements • Formation of a distributed leadership structure (“Woo Team”) • Establish of Woo Team co-chairs • Staff January 2026 retreat to foster and deepen connection • Designing of internal learning agenda led by colleagues to foster and promote internal learning	• 100% reported psychological safety (4.44/5) • 100% reported openness to new ideas (4.56/5) • 100% reported encouragement of risk-taking (4.78/5) • 89% strongly agreed leadership prompted reflection • 78% strongly agreed leadership listened to diverse viewpoints • 100% identified learning processes and practices as the primary gap

Note. Data collected by the author.

Phase II, Narrative Strategy Capacity and Distributed Leadership

Objective: To strengthen narrative fluency and build distributed strategic capacity across staff and network partners.

Findings: Overall, across the OYF network knowledge and capacity related to narrative change and cultural strategy increased (see Table 4), especially within some communities.

However, across the network these findings demonstrated that uneven implementation persisted, which informed OYF’s next phase of work in this area.

Table 4*Phase II Outputs and Outcomes*

Outputs	Outcomes (staff) pre-sessions/plenary	Outcomes (staff) post-sessions/plenary	Outcomes (network)
• Narrative trainings • Shared frameworks • Network-wide survey • Convening plenary • Cross-sector partnerships	• 42.86% applied narrative strategy • 14.29% saw narrative as messaging	• 78% identified harmful narratives • 70% reflected deeply on values that informed narratives • 60% likely to apply learning • 80% requested tools	• 39% of communities were integrating narrative in some work • 18% of communities were advanced users • Majority of network in early stages of narrative work

Note. Data collected by the author.

Phase III, Movement Alignment and Coordination Infrastructure

Objective: To align narrative efforts across the network.

Findings: OYF network alignment around narrative change and culture strategy was emergent (see Table 5); some communities had the knowledge and skills and were applying it to their collective work, and others were just beginning to familiarize themselves with the concepts. The next phase of work for me as a leader was to deepen the coordination structures across OYF to facilitate the transmission of knowledge and deepen our collective organization.

Table 5*Phase III Outputs and Outcomes*

Outputs	Outcomes
• Convenings • Cross-site sessions • Shared priorities • Expanded partnerships	• Shared language increased • Alignment remained informal and inconsistent

Note. Data collected by the author.

Phase IV, Youth Authority and Governance Infrastructure

Objective: To elevate youth authority in narrative strategy.

Findings: Youth voice had expanded (see Table 6). The next phase of our work in OYF focused on institutionalizing youth authority.

Table 6

Phase IV Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs	Outcomes
• Youth storytelling capacity-building sessions • \$5,000 grants • Youth co-designed OYF network convenings • Youth co-designed and co-led sessions on adultism • Youth funder engagement • Youth co-designed national learning agenda	• Youth voice increased • Governance authority remained limited

Note. Data collected by the author.

In conclusion, a coherent developmental arc was present across all four phases. This included relational safety (in Phase I), which enabled cognitive and strategic fluency (in Phase II), which led to seeded ecosystem coordination (in Phase III), with youth agency reflecting redistributed narrative authority (in Phase IV). Overall, the sequencing aligned with Senge's (1990) systems thinking. The author noted that conditions must align before influence can scale. While the most institutionalized conditions were internal culture and narrative fluency, the least institutionalized were ecosystem amplification and formal youth governance authority. This evidence suggested that, overall, my TOA was functioning as designed, with foundational, relational, and epistemic shifts already embedded and structural power-building taking meaningful shape.

Analysis of the Strategic Project

Overview: Narrative Power as Infrastructure

The purpose of this section is to diagnose the evidence I have shared thus far and to construct an argument about why my strategic project unfolded as it did. Given this aim, the analysis section includes an overall assessment of my TOA, noting general reflections at the meta level. Next, my analysis is organized around each of the four phases that made up my TOA, including a breakdown of the root causes within each phase. As part of exploring the root causes, I identify successes and opportunities for growth, considering everything from leadership to organizational culture, from structural design to external political forces. I also check the assumptions within each phase of my TOA, noting what was correct and where any gaps might have existed that served to provide rich and meaningful learning. Several sections also include surprises, tensions, and future-oriented resolutions. Finally, this section wraps up with an updated TOA designed to capture the overall learning from my analysis.

Meta-Level Findings

Beginning with an overall meta-level analysis across my TOA, I completed the project with two meta-level takeaways. The first meta-level finding was that although narrative change work is developmental, it is not in any way linear. In general, my TOA was organized in a way which assumed that completion of one phase would lend itself to the beginning of the next phase, so that ultimately there was some intentional integration between phases. However, the primary phase of embodied leadership—which served to establish a relational infrastructure—was the foundation of every subsequent phase and cut across each of them as well. At the same time, my analysis suggested that each phase happened in parallel with the other phases, not necessarily in

a sequenced fashion, as I had first imagined. These findings from my analysis inspired me to rethink the scaffolding and sequencing of my TOA to inform my future leadership.

The second meta-level take-away from my analysis—and this is a central argument of my capstone—is that all narrative change work is structural. It requires systems to facilitate and exchange knowledge, in addition to scaling and sustaining narrative change efforts. In fact, as organizational leaders transition, community members move on to new efforts, or political winds undermine narrative change efforts, systems serve to ensure the durability of this work for the long-term. This finding was critical because my strategic project demonstrated meaningful progress wherever systems and structures were already in place. However, where systems and structures were emergent, my project demonstrated less impact. It is also worth noting that narrative change work, and particularly the element of designing and growing narrative change infrastructure at the movement level, takes *at least* 3–5 years within a field or sector that already has meaningful alignment in place. Given that my strategic project was operating within a 10-month timeline, this finding was important for long-term success and needed to be contextualized within the scope of my strategic project.

Deeper Reflections

In addition to the meta-level findings noted above, there were two complementary findings that cut across all four phases of my strategic project that were worth noting. The first was connected to the previous meta-level finding regarding systems and infrastructure: wherever coordinated architecture—defined as structure designed to support actors to move together intentionally rather than haphazardly—was in place, my project achieved the greatest success, depth, and impact. At the same time, wherever *relational strength*—defined as the depth and durability of trust, psychological safety, and shared norms that allow people to stay engaged in

difficult, adaptive work without fragmenting—was a proxy for structure and systems, my project was less successful.

The second reflection my analysis yielded was that the most durable shifts occurred in areas where my TOA focused on shifting paradigms, specifically the mindsets of how colleagues, network members, and young adult partners saw the world, experienced trust, and transformed personal meaning-making. This was an important reflection because it suggested that the deepest leverage point in any system is the mindset from which it operates. The key activities that fostered mindset shifts included centering embodied leadership, engaging in grief and healing work, establishing collective care rituals, and codifying repair practices.

This reflection is important because organizational efforts seeking to advance justice, equity, and other virtues that live at the heart of expanding social and economic mobility for marginalized youth, families, and communities tend to be accompanied by adaptive challenges, like shifting narratives about race, redistributing power, or redesigning governance. To do this work effectively, people are required to sit with loss, confront uncertainty, and interrogate deeply held beliefs, without collapsing under the weight of unprocessed grief, especially in the context of high-performing organizations and within cultures of high expectations.

Heifetz et al. (2009) argued that one of the central tasks of leaders is to regulate distress, not eliminate it, so that people can stay in a productive zone long enough to adapt, without overwhelming the system. Heifetz et al. (2009) called this a “productive zone of disequilibrium” (p. 29). In this zone, people should experience enough tension to surface hard truths, enough safety to prevent collapse, enough structure to foster learning, and enough discomfort to grow. Once again, the collective care practices provided the adaptive infrastructure that deepened AFCS’s capacity to hold productive tension and metabolize emotions, so that internally we could

engage in narrative change work. The next section unpacks learning within the context of each phase of my TOA.

Phase I, Embodied leadership: Relational infrastructure (why healing became high leverage). Phase I and Phase IV yielded the greatest progress within my strategic project.

According to data from the *Journey to Become a Learning Organization* anonymous survey, colleagues within AFCS experienced strong psychological safety and relational trust. This mattered because, using Garvin et al.'s (2008) framework of the learning organization, the survey findings revealed that when asked which of the three building blocks required the most improvement, 100% of team members selected *learning processes and practices*, while no one identified the *supportive learning environment* or *leadership* as primary areas of concern. As previously noted, this finding both inverted the pattern Garvin et al. (2008) commonly observed within organizations and businesses, where leadership often ranks highly in self-assessment, while the cultural and relational foundations necessary for learning, including trust, psychological safety, tolerance for risk, and openness remain underdeveloped, leading to fragmentation, an inability to repair trust, and burnout. In contrast, the evidence suggested that the most difficult conditions to build—a supportive learning environment characterized by trust and safety, according to Garvin et al. (2008)—were firmly rooted in place at AFCS. Given this finding, the challenge AFCS faced was structural rather than relational; it needed to further formalize routines for reflection, knowledge capture, cross-team learning, and experimentation so that the existing cultural foundation was translated into durable organizational learning infrastructure.

Two important takeaways from this finding were that growing a supportive learning environment is both an adaptive challenge and arguably the most difficult output for leaders to

build. At the same time, systems that facilitate learning are technical, and thereby easier to build, especially in an organization with a high degree of psychological safety and an abiding commitment to impact. As a leader within AFCS, I felt confident that engaging colleagues in the process to codesign a learning system was going to yield exactly what was needed because team members would be honest, and direct, and ensure that what worked for one worked for all.

The other take-away that was critical for AFCS, and a finding that showed up consistently in my analysis, was that we were very good at relationships—individually, within the organization, within the network, and across the field. Where we lacked critical implementation was in building systems. Given that systems are critical for impact and durability in the social sector, this finding was both critical and time sensitive. As a long-term leader in the social sector, I believed that this second reflection was the result of how philanthropy works.

Philanthropy tends to invest in programs, not infrastructure or systems. In fact, the social sector does not have a universal definition for what comprises a system. In other words, there is no shared language or shared systems of measurement related to defining systems or assessing how they are transformed. At the same time, AFCS regrants 50% of its philanthropic resources to communities, which requires its members to lead from a lean budget. To navigate the reality of limited, time-bound resources, we prioritized community investments over building internal and external systems. While this was not universally true—for example, we had a measurement system that tracked opportunity youth metrics—we did not have an internal system for learning or the infrastructure in place to measure narrative change. In addition to philanthropy providing core support versus program-based funding, multi-year commitments would redress part of this challenge.

A surprise from this phase of implementing my TOA was that the relational conditions that fostered learning developed more quickly and more fully than the formal system designed to structure and facilitate learning. Although this insight was shared earlier, I was surprised to learn that I co-led an organization that had a uniquely positive work culture. At the same time, this felt like a source of tension because while the relationships were strong in ways that promoted psychological safety, without a formal learning system in place, internal learning within AFCS could be experienced as episodic and had not been documented or institutionalized.

Phase II, Narrative fluency: Cognitive infrastructure (clarity without scaffolding).

The second phase of implementing my TOA resulted in some success, given that staff within the organization and partners across the national network reported strengthened narrative literacy. Staff and partners gained fluency in frames, deep narratives, and cultural strategy. At the same time, colleagues and partners requested access to narrative labs and more application tools to meaningfully inform their learning.

The assumption in my TOA was, in part, that shared understanding would bolster coordinated practice, which would create a gap between the attainment of knowledge and the ability to practice implementing the new knowledge in ways that fostered deeper learning. Heifetz et al. (2009) explained this gap as the difference between technical and adaptive challenges. Learning new skills and new knowledge is a technical challenge. Applying new knowledge and skills is an adaptive challenge, which requires opportunities to test, experiment, adapt, solicit feedback, and reinforce knowledge. However, a more formal system to practice new knowledge was not conceived in the initial design of Phase II, in part because I did not connect the dots between technical and adaptive learning, as I was more focused on driving learning, and in part because I was operating under the assumption that it would take staff and

partners longer to develop narrative fluency. It was a surprise that my colleagues and our network shifted so quickly from seeking new skills to wanting to test them.

Han (2014) also offered a compelling insight about this finding. Han (2014) distinguished between mobilizing and organizing. Building narrative fluency is a mobilizing function because it standardizes information, language, and knowledge across many people. Distributed strategic ownership is an organizing function because it serves as infrastructure to hold shared responsibility, fosters reinforcement, and promotes greater creative problem-solving and collective accountability. One way to address the assumption at the root of the challenge was to build distributive leadership models across the national network so that a diverse and expansive set of leaders were harnessing a durable narrative ecosystem. I could also leverage the current distributive leadership model baked into our internal narrative change work—the Narrative Design Team—to foster learning and codesign spaces of experimentation and reinforcement.

Phase III, Ecosystem alignment (when trust does not equal synchronization). This phase had produced the least impact to date, in part because this phase took the longest to advance, which placed it out of alignment with my 10-month residency. However, during this phase I co-led asset mapping of the national social and economic justice movement, worked to formalize partnerships, and disseminated a narrative survey that was circulated across the field. In spite of achieving these outputs, several items remained and were still in early-stage development, including shared dashboards, amplification calendars, and synchronized narrative strategies.

The gap between progress and emergent outputs in Phase III could be explained by the scholarship of Putnam (2000) and Granovetter (1973), who noted that bonding refers to strong ties within a group and bridging refers to ties across groups. Granovetter’s (1973) “strength of

weak ties” argument noted that innovation and influence often travel through bridging connections, not bonding ones. Given that the OYF narrative ecosystem was still early-stage, messaging remains siloed as alignment emerged and the coordination infrastructure for amplification was beginning to form. Additionally, OYF lacked the ability to scale counternarrative messaging efforts. To redress this root challenge in the months ahead, it would be critical to establish coordination architecture at the ecosystem-wide level.

This finding was also critical because bonding capital builds internal trust and cohesion, while bridging capital enables cross-system alignment and scale. My analysis showed that durable narrative power required intentional investment in both. Doing so functioned as a protective factor that could sustain this work, which was important so that relationships would endure during good times and infrastructure would sustain progress when the social and political winds shifted.

Phase IV, Youth authority (energy without full governance redesign). Phase IV of implementing my TOA had achieved promising results to date. Young adult partners had received resources—\$5,000 grants—to launch narrative change campaigns aimed at reframing narratives about race, culture, dignity, belonging, healing, and interdependence, while signifying interpretive authority and epistemic justice.

The set-up of the youth grants, and their respective areas of focus, were responsible for the early-stage success of this phase of my TOA. Interpreting the root cause of the progress to date through the scholarship of Freire (1970) suggested that it was the result of praxis: reflection and action in dynamic relationship with one another. At the same time, Collin’s (2017) theory of epistemic justice offered important insight. Interpretive authority shifted with the regranting of resources to launch campaigns envisioned and led by young adults, moving them from narrators

to agenda-setters and from storytellers to story-makers (Benjamin, 2024). Most importantly, this redistribution was a paradigm shift, as it transformed mindsets, which is the essence of what narrative change aims to achieve.

As Donella Meadow's (2025) leverage framework has suggested, lower leverage changes include adjusting programs, modifying messages, and improving coordination. Higher leverage changes transform rules, systems, and paradigms. The epistemic redistribution in Phase IV of my TOA suggested shifts in all three areas, noting that when young people control meaning, they change what the system deems as normal or worthy. In other words, the analysis of Phase IV illuminated another surprise: redistributing interpretive authority was a higher leverage point than I had initially assumed, as it directly altered system goals and paradigms, rather than supporting young people to participate in a program.

In light of this finding, it was critical to remember Ahmed's (2012) claim that inclusion without a redistribution of power may ultimately lead to tokenization. Future work in this phase must consider governance authority.

Revised TOA

As previously noted, my original TOA implied developmental sequential progression: if I built a healing-centered relational foundation, then narrative fluency would deepen within AFCS and across the national network, then ecosystem alignment would scale to the movement level, and then youth authority would redistribute power. However, the findings from my analysis demonstrated that in Phase I organizational culture was strong but the system for learning within the organization needed to be developed further (Garvin et al., 2008). Similarly, in Phase II narrative fluency matured before a system to reinforce learning through labs and experimentation was in place (Han, 2014). Related to this finding, in Phase III, bonding capital was stronger than

bridging capital, signifying that internal coherence outpaced ecosystem alignment, reflecting the need for deeper architecture to share counternarratives and measure progress at the movement level. Finally, youth agency fostered the possibility of the fastest shift (Freire, 1970; Ginwright, 2018), demonstrating the value of epistemic redistribution (Meadows, 2025)—a consideration I had not held in the initial design of my TOA because I had been more focused on the technical side of designing learning and engaging youth, colleagues, and partners, than on the adaptive challenge of transforming mindsets within such a nominal period of time.

Given the rich learning this capstone generated, my refined TOA in Figure 8 reflects the knowledge that narrative power is sustained through infrastructure, noting that the greatest changes are the result of intentionally curating and constructing the infrastructure to advance and sustain this work. My updated TOA includes designing coordination architecture, institutionalizing learning systems, embedding governance structures for youth leadership, aligning partner and/or field incentives (e.g., dashboards, amplification calendars, etc.), and building shared measurement. Accordingly, my refined TOA reflects critical learning: durable narrative power requires the intentional construction of relational, cognitive, coordination, and governance infrastructures operating in tandem, given the symbiotic relationship functioning across and within each type of infrastructure.

Figure 8

Revised TOA: Conditions for Durable Narrative Power



Note. Generated using Anthropic’s Claude Opus 4.6 large-language model (<https://anthropic.com>).

Shifts in Thinking and Doing

My thinking on narrative change shifted (see Figure 8, above) in three critical ways. The first shift was from communications infrastructure and strategy to systems theory. I better understood that the aim of narrative change is to restructure the systems that produce, circulate, legitimize, and institutionalize interpretive authority or meaning. Going further, my thinking shifted around narrative change to now consider that it was about changing who gets to define reality, whose stories are believed and valued, and which perspectives shape decisions, including policies and public will. It is also about intervening in the infrastructures (i.e., systems) that

perpetuate stories, including influencing institutions, relationships, and power structures that determine which stories are heard, trusted, and acted upon.

My second shift in thinking clarified the difference between mobilization and organization (Han, 2014). Mobilization is about activation, a necessary device in narrative change work but not sufficient because it is limited to raising awareness, generating energy, getting people to show up, aligning around a shared message, and creating momentum, all of which can be episodic, driven by a singular leader, and vulnerable to fatigue or political backlash. On the other hand, organizing is about structure. It includes distributed leadership, defined roles for accountability, opportunities to practice and experiment to reinforce learning, governance redesign, and the alignment of incentives and feedback loops. In other words, it builds durable capacity, which transitions our work from aspirational to sustainable and self-reinforcing.

Finally, my third shift in thinking was to consider the leverage in elevating epistemic redistribution from the inception of any work at AFCS, particularly in light of the organization's vision and mission:

AFCS envisions a future where communities self-determine their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems they face... if communities have more power to lead change and transform systems, they will create a just and equitable society. The mission is to invest in, promote, and connect collaborative community-based efforts and movements that build the power, influence and impact of those with the least access to opportunity. (The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, n.d., para. 1-2)

Epistemic redistribution refers to the intentional shifting of authority over knowledge, meaning making, and ultimately what is deemed truthful from institutions and traditional sources of power

to the people and communities most impacted by the issues facing humanity. It is more than inclusion of voice; it is about recognizing those most impacted as authorities in designing durable solutions, including their ability to shape strategy based on lived experience and deep expertise.

By elevating epistemic redistribution from the outset of future work at AFCS, we can demonstrate an abiding commitment to the notion that narrative change is more than shifting perspectives and is instead about transforming who holds interpretative systemic authority. In practice, this includes AFCS redesigning structures, resources, and decision-making processes that better position young people and community leaders as authors, strategists, and agents of the narratives and systems that shape their lives. Durable system change is about redistributing interpretive authority, including shifting mindsets. This final shift is critical in redefining and redesigning our narrative work. It is about constructing systems capable of durably sustaining new meaning over time.

Closing

In summary, the findings from my strategic project confirmed the central thesis of my capstone: narrative power is infrastructure. Embodied leadership successfully built relational infrastructure. Narrative fluency strengthened cognitive infrastructure. The uneven progress in movement alignment revealed the necessity of explicit coordination infrastructure. Finally, youth authority highlighted the importance of formalizing governance infrastructure to sustain epistemic redistribution. While these findings were positive, they also illuminated the path for future-facing work focused on deepening structures to advance and sustain our narrative change work. This especially matters today, and likely in the future, because when narrative power is

scaffolded by durable infrastructure, it does not fall apart in response to political backlash. It endures, adapts, and grows.

Chapter 4: Implications for Self, Site, and Sector

Implications for Self

Healing Is Not Adjacent to Leadership; It Is Its Enabling Condition

The most significant finding of my capstone, which is also the most intimate, is that healing is not ancillary to narrative and system change work. It is the meta-infrastructure that makes all of the subsequent work possible. In other words, healing is not only about wellness but is also an infrastructure claim because healing is the foundation of any and all work aimed at building a more just and equitable world. Given the issues the social sector aims to redress—everything from climate change, to advancing education equity, to justice reform—healing is the soil that nurtures, grows, and sustains leaders across generations.

This finding was born out of grief, specifically the grief of losing my father on the eve of interviewing for the Ed.L.D. program in the winter of 2023. At the time, and unbeknownst to me, grief associated with the unexpected loss of my father unlocked unresolved grief connected to the passing of my mother, which occurred in 2018. Upon being accepted and matriculating into the Ed.L.D. program at HGSE, I began my education journey mired in unprocessed pain that was exacerbated by the broader political context of both Harvard University and the United States.

Beginning with the broader context, between 2022 and 2024, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, reversed affirmative action, and gutted key protections in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Initiatives aimed at removing structural barriers to capital and opportunity, such as The Fearless Fund—a grant initiative for Black women entrepreneurs—were declared illegal. Claudine Gay, Harvard’s first African American woman president, was forced to resign after six months, and a mere sixteen days later Bridget Terry Long, the first African American Dean of HGSE, announced her resignation at the end of the academic year. The campus that had

previously been electric with historic possibility went quiet. Moreover, I processed the fates of Claudine Gay and Bridget Terry Long with deep foreboding, believing that they likely reflected the impending fate of the first African American woman to be nominated for president of the United States: Vice President Kamala Harris.

My apprehension about Harris's fate was informed by the author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017), who wrote

it has been said that the first black presidency was mostly symbolic, a dismissal that deeply underestimates the power of symbols. Symbols don't just represent reality but can become tools to change it. The symbolic power of Barack Obama's presidency—that whiteness was no longer strong enough to prevent peons from taking up residence in the castle—assaulted the most deeply rooted notions of white supremacy and instilled fear in its adherents and beneficiaries. And it was that fear that gave the symbols Donald Trump deployed—the symbols of racism—enough potency to make him president and thus put him in position to injure the world. (p. XVI)

Haunted by Coates' warning that the symbolic power of Barack Obama's presidency—the suggestion that whiteness could no longer block access to power—generated the fear that gave Donald Trump's symbols enough potency to injure the world, I found myself asking: what would the possibility of a Black woman in the White House unleash? That question colored everything. It still does.

On November 6, 2024, Kamala Harris lost the presidential election. And Trump 2.0 officially began.

Kamala's inscrutable loss to Donald Trump can only be understood through a broader historical lens. It is here that Anna Julia Cooper's insight from 1892 is both instructive and

haunting. She asserted: “only the Black woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood ...then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’” (Cooper, 1892, p. 31). Cooper’s (1892) claim was not only about the burden Black women carry but about what our full inclusion into the social, economic, and political fabric and livelihood of democracy in the United States would signify: that both racism and patriarchy have been fundamentally upended. In this way, Black women’s inability to enter into the polity of America today is not incidental; it is diagnostic. It reveals the extent to which our democracy, and society, have not been transformed since the founding of this country.

More than a century later, the conditions Cooper (1892) imagined remain unrealized. Black women are not entering with “quiet, undisputed dignity.” Instead, they are asked to justify their presence through overperformance, to absorb institutional shock—for themselves and for others under their leadership—and to carry responsibilities that extend far beyond their formal roles. The distance between Cooper’s (1892) vision and our current reality is precisely where the weight I go on to describe takes shape.

It was within this crucible of personal grief, institutional rupture, and democratic erosion that I came to believe that narrative change work would require deep healing. Moreover, I intuitively sensed that healing would not serve as preparation for the real work, but would be the work itself, especially as a Black woman leading a justice organization. This belief was informed by the idea that leaders, systems, institutions, and governments all carry unprocessed grief and that grief shapes everything from informing decisions to constricting imagination. Without the ability and space to meaningfully process grief and transmute it into hope and healing, it can show up as urgency and reactivity that reproduce harm. Therefore, in June 2024 I began working with an executive coach whose practice centered on supporting Black women leading justice

work to heal from legacy, cultural, and personal burdens—defined respectively as intergenerational trauma passed down through ancestry and family systems, extreme beliefs or behaviors absorbed from the broader culture, and emotional weight originating from specific lived experiences. I also began working with a therapist whose practice centered ancestral healing and the transmission of ancestral medicine as a foundation for engaging the world, particularly with an intention of advancing equity and justice. Together, this healing work transformed not only how I led, but what I understood leadership to be.

The central implication for my future leadership is this: spiritual coherence and healing practices are inextricably linked and non-negotiable. They are not acts of self-care or indulgence but serve to build and fortify structural integrity. Without this grounding, I risk reproducing the urgency, scarcity, and reactivity that narrative change seeks to dismantle. In light of this revelation, I will maintain an abiding commitment to reflective practice, to my community—personally and professionally—with other Black women leaders, and to the formal systems, networks, and healing relationships that keep me spiritually grounded. Doing so will continuously foster the enabling conditions for moral and impactful leadership. These practices enable me to connect with my ancestors and see the through line of today’s challenges with a historical perspective that gives meaning and insight to the call on my life and to the abiding responsibility I have to lead from a deep well of love.

Given this, I will ensure that any organization or institution I lead has formal infrastructure, values, and practices that honor and normalize rest, including sabbaticals, retreats, and policies that reinforce wellbeing. Honoring rest, and its relationship with movement and wisdom, are the preconditions for the kind of leadership our moment, and advancing equity and justice in general, requires.

My Identity as a Black Woman Is Epistemically Central, Not Incidental

As a Harlem-born Black girl earning a doctorate from Harvard, I understand that this truth carries weight in both directions: it holds the pride of what is possible and the exhaustion of what it costs. Given this truth, my identity is not incidental to this work or its findings. *It is epistemically central.* Throughout my education and career, and especially in the context of my strategic project, my lived experience sharpened my analysis of invisible power, narrative harm, and the economic, social, and structural conditions that either enable or erode justice-oriented leadership. At the same time—and this is critical—my identity as a Black woman heightened the emotional and spiritual labor of leadership, thereby raising the costs of what it takes to lead, oftentimes without a historical analysis or contemporary solution to integrate and centralize the primacy and value of rest in leadership. This is a real tension Black women navigate daily in the social sector, and it has not been adequately named or theorized in mainstream leadership literature, in spite of all that Black women have historically carried and hold today as leaders in the sector.

Black women carry an abiding responsibility for their race, community, family—nuclear and extended—children, jobs, and homes, while mustering enough energy to care for themselves. And Black women carry a vision for all of humanity: ideas about healing, peace, and justice that are rarely credited for the epistemological contributions they offer. As rapper and actress Lauren Hill (1998) famously rapped, “my rhymes is heavy like the mind of Sister Betty” (2:24).

Moreover, the guilt associated with rest is, as I learned through my healing work, both a legacy and cultural burden with roots in slavery. This burden was deepened post-slavery as Black women forcibly became the primary holders of Black families in response to government-sanctioned mandates that separated families and withheld economic, social, and other structural

supports (Carby, 1987). Most notably, this burden is not metaphorical. It is physiological, psychological, and intergenerational. And, it is particularly acute for Black women leading in the social sector, where urgency culture and the martyrdom complex produce conditions in which overextension is mistaken for commitment and exhaustion is confused with excellence.

In light of this truth, my resolution is rooted in a reframe I now hold as foundational: rest is political reclamation. Healing and rest are intentional acts of resistance to extractive systems, including capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and the nonprofit industrial complex. Therefore, rest is not a break from the work. It is a birthright that honors my ancestors, deepens my ancestral memory, expands my creativity, and prepares me to lead with imagination rather than from reaction and exhaustion. As I have worked with experts to lay down legacy, cultural, and personal burdens, I have experienced what I can only describe as spaciousness: a deeper connection to ancestral intelligence; an expanded ability to reimagine, recreate, and rebuild; a greater curiosity to construct bridges in places of historical difference; diminished self-doubt; and an abiding commitment to expressing my values, beliefs, and ideas via an unapologetic voice. The confusion white supremacy attempted to cultivate in me has been replaced by clarity. That clarity is strategic, grounded, and morally centered.

For Black women reading this in the future: the exhaustion you feel, which may be coupled with a sense of guilt, is not solely yours. It is a burden affiliated with the legacy of slavery. It is important to know that exhaustion is not weakness. For me, the anger I experienced in response to racism and patriarchy has softened into sadness and ultimately opened up into curiosity. Most importantly, the transformation has been both healing and has deepened my relationship with wisdom. Please know that the vision you carry is not in spite of everything you have lived through and currently hold. It is because of it.

Rest, Movement, and Ancestral Wisdom Are a Rhythm of Leadership, Not a Supplement to It

Together, rest and movement stimulate the mind, body, and spirit in ways that expand access to multiple forms of wisdom: ancestral, communal, environmental, and embodied. Deepening my relationship with these wisdoms has increased my capacity to hold complexity, to sit with multiple competing truths simultaneously, and to lead with presence rather than performance. Rest and movement operate as a rhythm because giving space to guilt over rest produces over-functioning and under-dreaming. Additionally, exhaustion, which capitalism and white supremacist culture (Okun, n.d.) work in tandem to generate, undermines and even destroys imagination. Therefore, healing from exhaustion is not a detour from engaging in and leading transformative work. It is how transformative work becomes durable and intergenerational.

Given this, I now understand that rest, movement, and ancestral wisdom are not optional enhancements to leadership but function as its organizing logic. The leaders our moment requires will not be sustained by urgency alone, but by their ability to move in rhythm—with themselves, with their communities, and with the wisdom of those who came before them. To lead in this way is to reject extraction as a condition of impact and to instead cultivate conditions for durability, imagination, and collective thriving. Importantly, this is not a shift in practice; it is a redefinition of what leadership is.

Pacing Is Strategic; Power-Mapping Must Include Funders

This project clarified that pacing is itself a form of strategy. By slowing the initial rollout of narrative initiatives to prioritize personal healing, relational trust, and shared frameworks, I was able to resist institutional pressure to produce rapid outputs vs. building the relational capital necessary to support the long-term success of my strategic project. As the evidence

demonstrated, narrative trainings were more effective because participants entered with trust and shared language. Youth re-grants gained legitimacy because they were embedded in a genuine commitment to epistemic redistribution. Most importantly, durable narrative power requires disciplined sequencing.

At the same time, the project revealed a gap: although power analysis informed the work conceptually, I did not sufficiently interrogate the funder power dynamics shaping organizational priorities and internalized scarcity beliefs, including our collective ability to imagine and dream outside of real financial constraints. Future efforts will require intentional power-mapping that includes funder relationships, longitudinal narrative indicators, and research partnerships that deepen accountability, spaciousness to dream without constraints, and rigor.

Governance Is the Next Frontier of Leadership Growth

Youth voice, while necessary, is insufficient without structural authority. While AFCS had youth advisors on its funder governing board, I felt compelled to interrogate their ability to shape decisions, priorities, and resource flow. Achieving and sustaining epistemic redistribution requires formal governance mechanisms and accountability structures that survive leadership transitions. In the future, I aim to reconsider institutional practices and governance transformation in ways that deepen genuine partnerships with the young adults across our national network, and proximate leaders in general.

In summary: narrative power requires leaders who are spiritually intact, relationally grounded, and structurally disciplined. My wholeness is not separate from the strategy. It is its enabling condition.

Implications for Site

Healing and Collective Care Are Organizational Infrastructure, Not Cultural Add-Ons

The evidence from my strategic project made it clear that narrative change cannot be sustained through episodic trainings or communication campaigns. It must be institutionalized. And institutionalization begins with the least mainstream and most underinvested dimension of organizational life: the inner conditions of the people doing the work.

Based on the outcomes of my strategic project, wherever coordinated architecture was in place—specifically, structure designed to support stakeholders to move together intentionally rather than haphazardly—the project achieved its greatest depth and impact. Wherever relational strength functioned as a substitute for structure, the outcomes were less significant. This finding carried a clear message: relationships are not a replacement for structure, and structure without relationships rooted in care is fragile at best and lends itself to burnout. Both relationships rooted in care and structure framed with values rooted in love and empathy are required. They are symbiotic. This interdependence must be designed for, not hoped for.

Based on the findings from my strategic project, AFCS is a highly effective, high-achieving organization rooted in a strong, positive, love-centered work culture. To maintain and deepen this truth in the future, AFCS should continue to deeply embed collective care practices into annual operating plans, allocate recurring resources for facilitation and conflict repair, and incorporate relational trust metrics into staff assessments. Individual healing supports—such as coaching, therapy, healing spaces, and reflective retreats—should be made available across the organization. Institutionalizing these practices reduces reliance on individual leaders and protects cultural gains during periods of political pressure or leadership transition. AFCS should also invest in sabbaticals for all staff, beginning at 5 years of tenure and recurring every 3 years

thereafter. Finally, AFCS should formally track retention, staff morale, and values alignment alongside program metrics, as primary indicators of organizational health.

The Deepest Leverage Point Is Mindset, Not Messaging

The most durable shifts in this project occurred where my TOA focused on changing paradigms, particularly in how colleagues, network members, and young adult partners experienced trust, saw the world, and made meaning. The deepest leverage point in any system is the mindset from which it operates, not the communications it produces.

The activities that fostered seemingly durable mindset shifts—centering embodied leadership, engaging in grief and healing work, establishing collective care rituals, and codifying repair practices—were rarely included in professional development trainings or organizational capacity-building frameworks. However, they should have been. According to Heifetz et al. (2009), a “productive zone of disequilibrium” (p. 29) includes infusing a combination of enough tension to surface hard truths, enough safety to prevent collapse, enough structure to foster learning, and enough discomfort to generate growth. However, to foster these conditions leaders have to be deeply in tune with the collective culture of the organization and the individual needs of colleagues. For AFCS, the collective care practices we collectively identified functioned as adaptive infrastructure, expanding the organization’s capacity to hold a zone that could metabolize difficult emotions. This was what it looked like for healing to operate as organizational structure.

This finding lent itself to key questions for organizations and the sector writ large to consider, including: How do embodied practices help leaders and colleagues experience the mindset shifts they aim to create in the world? What scaffolding is necessary to foster the

emotional literacy within professional contexts that makes mindset shifts rooted in embodied leadership possible?

Narrative Strategy Must Be Institutionalized, Not Episodic

Building and deepening narrative strategy capacity must move from a project-based initiative to a cross-cutting organizational endeavor. AFCS should develop a formal narrative playbook articulating core values, frames, counter-narratives, and language guidance. A cross-site, multi-level narrative learning cohort would deepen distributed leadership, while a centralized repository of stories, data, and cultural assets would support coordinated amplification, beginning at the network level before expanding across the broader ecosystem. Narrative strategy should also be embedded within grantmaking criteria and policy engagement processes to ensure alignment across functions.

Han (2014) distinguished mobilizing from organizing, noting that building narrative fluency is a mobilizing function and distributed strategic ownership is an organizing function. The Narrative Design Team, which I put in place to advance my strategic project, already functioned as a distributed leadership model internally. I suggested that AFCS extend this organizing function across the national network, enlisting state coalitions and community leaders to co-design spaces for experimentation, reflection, and documentation.

Building on the previous recommendation, a notable finding was that the relational conditions that fostered learning developed faster than formal systems to sustain that learning. While evidence from my strategic project found that AFCS had a uniquely positive organizational culture—without formal learning systems in place—internal learning remained episodic and undocumented. Partnering with the Director of Learning and Impact to formalize

team reflection time, develop cross-team learning protocols, and design measurement dashboards with formal feedback loops would transform this cultural strength into durable infrastructure.

Youth Authority Must Be Structural, Not Consultative

Youth authority is infrastructure. The Youth Voice Narrative Change initiative demonstrated the power of redistributing narrative authorship and resources, but temporary grant mechanisms were insufficient for transformation. AFCS should formalize youth governance seats with genuine decision-making authority, including establishing standing budget allocations controlled by young adults and codifying intergenerational decision-making protocols. These changes would move youth engagement from consultative to structural, aligning practice with stated commitments to epistemic justice (Collins, 2017). Lessons learned from expanding epistemic authority with young people can also inform future efforts to redesign the sector's relationship with all traditionally marginalized communities and proximate leaders.

Ecosystem Design and Measurement Must Be Formalized

OYF's bridging and bonding ties (Putnam, 2000) positioned AFCS well to facilitate narrative coherence across geographies and sectors. Annual narrative ecosystem mapping, including identifying trusted connectors across nodes (Castells, 2013), and coordinated amplification calendars would strengthen this advantage. Shared measurement frameworks would institutionalize coherence and reduce fragmentation. Beyond tracking outputs, AFCS should partner with a research institution to assess shifts in public discourse, policy framing, and youth legitimacy in media narratives.

Collectively, these implications call for AFCS to treat narrative power not as a communications function, but as cross-cutting infrastructure embedded within leadership, governance, organizational culture, network design, and movement influence.

Implications for Sector

This capstone contributes to the social sector—with particular emphasis on education and youth development—by making three original claims not yet widely documented in the literature, which are organized subsequently by leverage: from most original and least mainstream to most structurally consequential.

Healing Is Meta-Infrastructure for Durable Systems Change

The highest-leverage implication for the sector is this: if narrative functions as cultural infrastructure shaping the durability of systems, then healing-centered leadership functions as meta-infrastructure. It *is* the primary enabling condition that stabilizes and sustains narrative ecosystems over time. This is a fractal claim. How leaders relate internally shapes organizational culture. Organizational culture shapes movement culture. Movements shape our world. Psychological safety inside institutions predicts whether coalitions cohere or fracture under pressure, leading to the claim that personal wellbeing is not a private matter. It is the foundation of our collective capacity.

The social sector was built on a capitalist foundation rooted in the extraction of labor and is upheld by philanthropic funding cycles that offer 1-year grants to redress generational inequities. This structural contradiction produces urgency culture, martyrdom, and a disproportionate reliance on the over-productivity of women of color—a reliance that is unsustainable and rarely named clearly or held objectively in the design of sustainable solutions to inequity and injustice. In other words, the sector is invested in advancing justice using a structure that reproduces injustice. Given this reality, the sector must examine and reform its practices with an aim to center rest and healing as structural imperatives: they are the architecture through which transformation becomes durable.

With healing, leaders are able to not only regulate harm and trauma, rather than react to it; they are able to transmute it into wisdom and vision. Psychological safety fosters narrative risk-taking rooted in truth-telling, and distributed leadership sustains coherence across organizational transitions. Investing in individual and collective healing enables leaders across the sector to transmute pain and trauma into power, imagination, love, joy, empathy, and strategy, all of which enables movements to endure. Without healing, narrative change collapses under political backlash or pendulum swings in the philanthropic sector. My residency experience grounded this concretely: inviting a healing doula to join a plenary on narrative change was a deliberate design choice rooted in the belief that engaging in narrative change requires confronting deeply embodied trauma. Processing that grief requires intentional space, practices, and supports. If the social sector is serious about redressing the root causes of inequity and injustice, then healing practices must be embedded into strategy and program design from the outset.

Non-Western and Ancestral Ways of Knowing Are Epistemological Systems, Not Supplements

The sector must embrace non-traditional and non-Western forms of knowledge as legitimate epistemological systems that inform justice and drive sustainable social change. Ancestral wisdom must be regarded as valid data. Embodied wisdom must be regarded as information. Community knowledge must be regarded as strategy. These shifts undermine Western notions of productivity, challenge the dominance of traditional measurement systems, and create greater spaciousness for diverse models of leadership—including models rooted in rest, imagination, and collective dreaming—while honoring the innate wisdom that resides within leaders of color.

When embodied leadership and ancestral knowledge are embraced as legitimate funds of knowledge, emotional literacy transforms from a soft skill into epistemology in action. This reframe creates conditions for leaders to transmute success and pain—especially harm rooted in oppression—into collective meaning-making that deepens learning and unlocks greater wisdom. It enables organizations to recognize and interrupt internalized oppression and intergenerational patterns of harm without defensiveness. It supports colleagues to transmute pain into purpose in ways that foster agency and sovereignty. This is a bridge between worldview and culture that the sector urgently needs to build.

Epistemic Redistribution Is a Higher-Leverage Intervention Than Messaging

Narrative change is often understood as a communications strategy: better messages, stronger frames, more compelling stories. My capstone findings suggest that this framing fundamentally misunderstands where leverage lives. The key variable is not what story is being told; it is who has the power to define its meaning. Therefore, the real question is whether governance structures redistribute meaning-making power to the people and communities most impacted by the values, systems, and lack of access to opportunity that dominant stories and narratives uphold.

Epistemic redistribution (Fricker, 2007)—the transfer of interpretive authority to those most directly affected by the systems being changed—is a higher-leverage intervention than any messaging campaign. Unless governance, budgets, and institutional processes at the sector level reorganize around the interpretive authority of youth, women of color, and communities historically excluded from knowledge production, narrative change risks remaining performative, episodic, and unsustainable. Youth participation is common in justice-oriented organizations. Youth budgetary authority and decision-making power are not. The sector must

ask: Whose knowledge counts? Whose grief is legible? Whose imagination is resourced? These are governance questions that must be considered long before they inform program design.

Narrative Is Infrastructure—and Must Be Treated as Such

Narrative change must be recognized as foundational systems infrastructure. Dominant narratives shape everything from funding priorities to policy feasibility, from perceptions of youth deservedness to the invisible ceiling on what change is considered possible or desirable. Efforts to reform education, housing, or healthcare without tending to narrative frames risk fragility and surface-level impact. It is akin to rearranging furniture on the Titanic.

Stakeholders across the education sector should integrate narrative strategy into strategic planning, leadership preparation, policy design, and advocacy. Narrative coherence must be cultivated with the same intentionality as program implementation. And philanthropy, which often invests in programs while underfunding the coordination architecture that makes those programs cohere and sustainable, must reckon with its structural role in fragmenting the narrative ecosystems it claims to support.

Closing

In closing, the central finding of this capstone is that narrative power is infrastructure. The central implication is that infrastructure requires disciplined design, relational grounding, and leaders capable of holding grief and vision simultaneously. Sustaining transformative narrative change will require institutions and sectors willing to redesign themselves in accordance with this finding.

The findings documented here that have not yet been widely named across the field can be stated plainly: narrative power is not a communications function; it is a governance function. The highest-leverage narrative intervention is not better storytelling but the redistribution of

interpretive authority. Movement-level narrative coherence begins with relational coherence inside institutions. Healing is not adjacent to justice work; it is its enabling condition. And without spiritual coherence in leadership, narrative change collapses under backlash or leadership transitions.

These are not abstract claims. They are the findings of a Harlem-born Black woman doing doctoral work at Harvard, leading a national, globally reaching portfolio aimed at transforming the narratives that shape the lives of young people and families who have been failed by systems not designed for their flourishing. The work before us is not only strategic. It is spiritual. And the foundation on which it stands is healing.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

From Narrative Intervention to Narrative Power

This capstone's premise is that policy change without narrative transformation is fragile and ephemeral. Since the founding of this country, the United States has consistently demonstrated that changing policies and laws alone, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), *Roe v. Wade*, and affirmative action, is not sustainable when dominant narratives are both deeply rooted and socially and culturally pervasive. From Black chattel slavery to Reconstruction, the Civil Rights movement, and mass incarceration, we have witnessed how deep narratives about race, scarcity, and deservedness have shaped public will, systems, opportunity, and democracy.

While arguing that transformative systems change calls for accessing, cohering, and exercising narrative power, this capstone also posits that structural transformation work requires deep inner healing and wellbeing work that is cultivated through embodied leadership, distributed capacity, coordinated ecosystem alignment, and epistemic justice and authority, particularly for Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth.

Across each section of this capstone, I have made the case for employing four integrated conditions:

1. Embodied leadership and a culture of care that produces psychological safety and relational trust;
2. Distributed narrative strategy capacity that enables leaders across ecosystems to act with fluency and coherence;
3. Movement-level alignment and amplification infrastructure that institutionalizes shared frames across networks, coalitions, and ecosystems;

4. Youth-led narrative authority that shifts who defines meaning, legitimacy, and value.

Altogether these elements form a developmental arc from inner evolution to external transformation of ecosystem power that is fractal in nature and strategic by design. The evidence presented throughout this capstone demonstrates that meaningful progress has been made toward building these conditions within AFCS and in the OYF national network, and that they are beginning to take shape at the broader movement level.

This capstone has documented how collective care practices were codified and then ritualized. It has told the structural story of how narrative fluency expanded through codesigned trainings, shared frameworks, and within cross-sector partnerships across the narrative ecosystem. At the same time, this capstone has highlighted how youth exercised authority to expand epistemic justice (Collins, 2017; Fricker, 2007) and move into roles of agenda-setters and story-makers (Benjamin, 2024). Most importantly, this work persisted past this capstone, in part because I continued to work at the Aspen Institute after completing my residency and in part due to the fact that harnessing and exercising narrative power is not a campaign. It is long-term infrastructural work that requires interpersonal and relational work, in addition to structural change.

This capstone has argued that if society fails to transform dominant narratives about Black, Latine, and Indigenous youth then even the most promising innovations in education and employment will be subjected to deficit framing and relegated to failure, reproducing false narratives and negative generational outcomes. Given that narrative power dictates moral imagination, young people who are framed as problems will lead to continuously failing schools, rather than institutions of liberation and belonging. If philanthropy invests in programs without

interrogating how narratives shape public will and thereby policy, investments will remain surface level—episodic in nature without redressing the root cause.

During a time of democratic backsliding and attempts to dismantle Black history—which have included everything from the forced removal of plaques and other memorabilia commemorating slavery (Joselow & Schuessler, 2026) to putting pressure on the National Museum of African American History and Culture to remove references to slavery and Jim Crow (Black, 2025)—the struggle over narrative power is pervasive, omnipresent, and will continue to escalate. Notably, the struggle over the *meaning* of narratives *is* the struggle of democracy. As suggested throughout this capstone, Castells (2013) reminded us that power lies in shaping interpretive frames. Building on this truth, Gaventa (1982) suggested that norms, beliefs, and assumptions operate as invisible power, which is more durable than policy and legal decisions. Importantly, this capstone has made it clear that narrative change is not ancillary to system and policy change; it is foundational to both. Therefore, education and social sector leaders must pursue integrated strategies that transform laws and narratives, while also working to advance individual and collective wellbeing. Pursuing integrated strategies that transform both laws and narratives is critical in redressing the historical pattern in which legal victories that advance racial justice are overturned by dominant narratives that reshape their meaning, adding credence to Stevenson’s (2019) observation that while the North won the Civil War, the South ultimately won the *narrative war* (Morgan, para. 3), shaping collective memory and meaning making in ways that durably justify ongoing racial inequality.

Next Steps and Final Reflection

While my strategic project was successful in accomplishing a great deal of what I set out to achieve, due to time constraints and the long-term nature of narrative change work, I was not

able to accomplish every goal. Based on this, the following next steps were a priority as I continued in my role at the Aspen Institute:

1. Collectively identifying, documenting, and institutionalizing shared measures for assessing narrative change impact. This included developing shared indicators of narrative coherence and cultural power.
2. Deepening youth governance authority to advance epistemic justice, including formalizing youth roles in decision-making processes, particularly in intergenerational spaces and across the OYF national network.
3. Expanding narrative infrastructure for message flooding, including coordinated multi-level and nodal dissemination strategies to shift deep narrative frames.
4. Longitudinal research on narrative sustainability, including future inquiries into how narrative ecosystems sustain or adapt during or in spite of political cycles or backlash.

This capstone was inspired by a quote from Grace Lee Boggs: “transform yourself to transform the world” (brown, 2017, p. 53). This call to transform oneself as a critical part of dismantling harmful systems, noting that Boggs believed that lives, work, and relationships are the frontline to building a better world” (brown, 2017, p. 53), is an abiding belief that has remained top of heart and top of mind for me in this season of life, and it will remain a personal north star for me in the years and seasons ahead.

From embodied healing practices to distributed narrative leadership, from ecosystem alignment to youth agency, my strategic project and this accompanying capstone affirm that narrative transformation begins with the self and scales outward in a fractal pattern that impacts relationships, organizations, networks, coalitions, institutions, systems, culture, policies, laws, and ultimately the world. Building an education system, and ultimately a democracy, that honors

the worth, dignity, belonging, Light, and freedom to thrive of every young person, especially our most historically vulnerable and marginalized youth, specifically Black, Latine, and Indigenous young people, requires more than innovative programs and justice rhetoric. We must transform the stories and narratives we tell about who they are and their inherent, transformative value to the world.

Narrative change is structural. When cultivated with love, care, coherence, strategy, and courage, it can reshape how youth are served, how they lead, and the collective future we all imagine, including our democracy. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice” (brown, 2022, para. 1). This is an important reminder that the work ahead is difficult and will take a long time because the arc does not bend on its own. It bends when we change the narrative.

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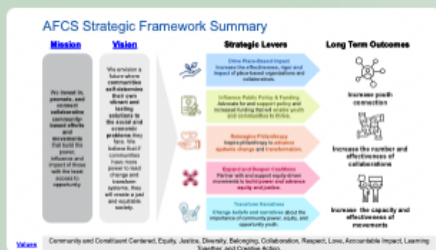
Appendix A: Aspen Forum for Community Solutions Strategic Plan



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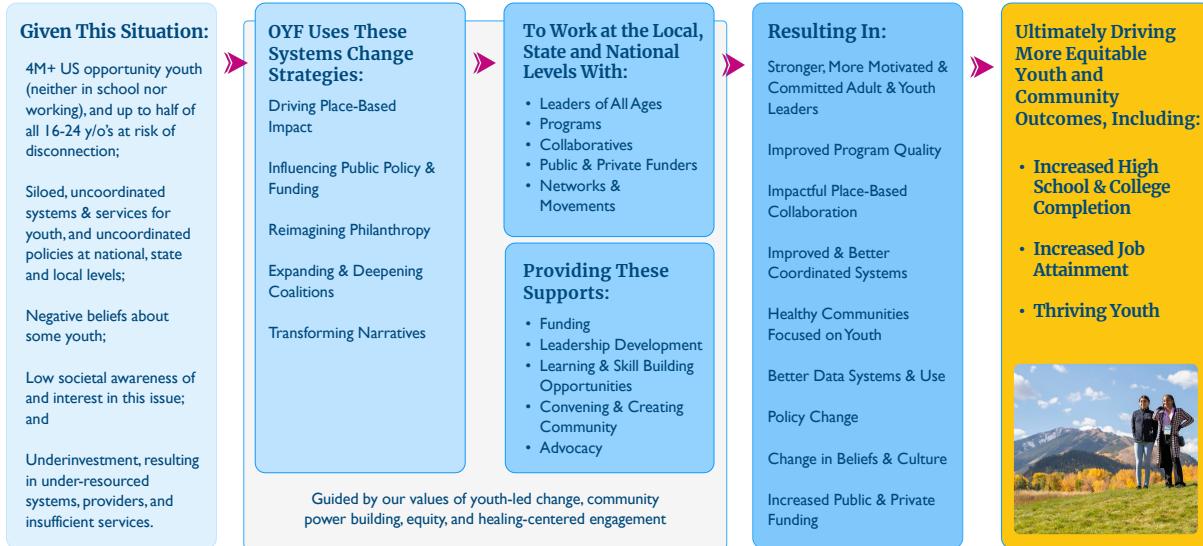
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Appendix B: OYF Theory of Action

The Opportunity Youth Forum Theory of Change and Action



Appendix C: Aspen Youth Voice Narrative Project Application

Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum

Request for Proposals (RFP)

Youth Voice Narrative Change Project

Funding Amounts: \$1,500–\$5,000 per project

Eligibility: Youth ages 16–30

Application Timeline: Applications due Monday, February 16, 2026

Project Timeline: March 2, 2026 – December 31, 2026 (9 months)

Project Purpose: The ultimate goal of the Youth Voice Narrative Change Project is to shift power, perception, and possibility by positioning young people—especially those most impacted by harmful systems—as the authors of the narratives that shape culture, community, and systems change. Using radical imagination, youth-led storytelling, art, civic engagement, and healing-centered practices, these investments aim to disrupt dominant, deficit-based, harmful narratives, while also building collective power, wellbeing, purpose, and belonging with and for young people and their adult partners, community leaders, and other stakeholders who are important to the applicant. This grant, and its final product(s) aim to contribute to a broader narrative and cultural strategy that influences the field and advances long-term systems change, including reducing the number of opportunity youth nationally over the next decade.

1. Overview

We invite young leaders from the current cohort of Opportunity Youth Forum Leadership Council (OYF) members (between the ages of 16–30) to apply for funding to lead a Youth Voice Narrative Change Project in their local community. These projects will support young people to reimagine and reshape the dominant narratives affecting their lives, families, peers, and communities—moving from personal wellbeing toward collective transformation rooted in healing.

This Request for Proposals (RFP) aims to invest in youth leadership that builds collective transformation through narrative change.

We will award 4–5 grants to youth-led projects that use storytelling, art, culture, and civic engagement to challenge harmful narratives and uplift stories of healing, belonging, justice, and collective transformation and thriving.

2. Purpose of the Youth Voice Narrative Change Project

The Youth Voice Narrative Change Project (YVNCP) recognizes and honors young people as culture-strategists, storytellers, leaders, activists, protagonists and change-makers whose voices are essential to shaping a more just, equitable, and connected future. With this vision in mind, the Youth Voice Narrative Change Project aims to support young adult partners to achieve the following:

- Identify dominant and harmful narratives impacting their communities
- Create and share counter-stories rooted in lived experience, healing, wellbeing, belonging, and hope
- Build collective power by amplifying their voices, the voices of their peers, the voices of their families and the voices of community members through creative and digital platforms
- Inspire local and broader cultural, policy, institutional, systems and narrative change

Content created by young adult partners will aid the Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum in the design of a narrative change and cultural strategy agenda for the broader opportunity youth and young adult movement. Content will also be used in Aspen OYF messaging, campaigns, convenings, communities of practice, and other gatherings and/or learning opportunities associated with the national network, including within the Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) gatherings.

In addition to partnering with youth on a narrative change agenda, Aspen OYF will partner with narrative change consultants, the Aspen OYF team, national partners, and community site leaders. Design activities will culminate into a narrative change strategy meant to impact the broader field and ultimately reduce the national number of opportunity youth by 500,000 in the next 10 years.

3. Who Should Apply

You are invited to apply if you meet the following criteria:

- o If you are **currently** participating as a fellow on the Aspen Opportunity Youth Forum Leadership Council
- o If you participated in codesigning, attending, and participating and/or leading content at the spring convening (in Los Angeles, CA, May 19-21, 2025) and fall convening (in Aspen, October 27-29, 2025), including joining bi-weekly design meeting with Aspen leadership.
- o If you participate in monthly Leadership Council fellow check-ins led by Jamiel Alexander.
- o If, upon being awarded this grant, you can **commit to bi-weekly check-ins with Aspen leadership** to discuss your project, share ideas, communicate updates, and consider

outcomes, including how to share and showcase your project, and meaningful progress, at OYF network convenings. Dates for bi-weekly meetings will be scheduled with grantees to ensure dates and times accommodate (as best as possible) grantee schedules.

- If, upon being awarded this grant, you can ***commit to submitting monthly 1-3 paragraphs of updates*** on your project to Aspen leadership.

Current youth fellows who meet these criteria should also be between the ages of 16 and 30 at the time of application and leading (or proposing to lead) a youth-driven project in your local community that is designed to address harmful narratives that impact outcomes for young people. Please do not share or distribute this RFP, as only current Leadership Council fellows are invited to apply.

We encourage applicants to share a vision for using narrative, art, storytelling, or civic engagement to challenge harmful stories and uplift empowering ones, noting that applicants are supported to focus on a range of topics from justice reform to mental health and/or any other subject that is important to the applicant. If you are an individual youth leader, part of a local collaborative, or part of a youth-serving organization, please make these details clear in your application.

Applicants do not need prior grant experience. First-time applicants are welcome.

4. Funding Details

1. **Grant size:** \$1,500–\$5,000 per project
2. **Number of awards:** 4–5
3. **Project period:** March 2, 2026 – March 1, 2027 (12 months)

Funds may be used to support artist stipends and/or youth leadership stipends, materials and supplies to cover project expenses, digital media production (e.g. the use of videos, audio support, design technology, and/or social media campaigns); organizing and hosting community events, workshops, and/or exhibits, travel expenses related to project activities, actions or convenings, and documentation and storytelling activities. If your application includes activities outside of this scope please note this in your application as we are open to suggestions from applicants.

Please include a detailed, line-item budget that articulates projected expenses. We will partner closely with applicants if/as the budget line items change.

5. What We're Looking For (Project Focus Areas)

Funded projects should focus on narrative change through one or more of the following areas:

4. **Art & Creative Expression:** visual art, murals, performance, music, poetry, zines, or film

5. **Storytelling:** oral histories, digital stories, podcasts, youth journalism, or community storytelling circles
6. **Civic & Community Engagement:** public dialogue, teach-ins, community forums, or youth-led campaigns
7. **Digital & Media Campaigns:** social media storytelling, multimedia content, or online organizing

Applicants are required to clearly demonstrate how their projects aim to identify a harmful or limiting narrative(s); describe the new story or counter-narrative being created by the project; articulate design partners and audience for the project, and explain how the story will be shared, including timeline for dissemination. Applicants are also required to connect their projects to the [values](#) of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions and the [vision](#) and [mission](#) of the Opportunity Youth Forum while sharing a specific vision for their project.

6. Support Beyond Funding

In addition to grant funding, selected grantees will receive:

8. All applicants are invited to participate a webinar to learn more about this funding opportunity and/or ask questions about their impending applications. The date of the webinar is TBD and will be determined with the applicants
 9. Connection to a youth narrative change learning community, consultants and Aspen Forum staff working on narrative change
 10. Opportunities to share work through virtual communities of practice and other gathering of the OYF national network (virtual and in-person)
 11. Invitations to public showcases and convenings, including:
 - Legacy Museum & Conversation with Bryan Stevenson: Tuesday, May 12 – Thursday, 14, 20026 in Montgomery, Alabama
 - Partners in Youth Development Using Indigenous Wisdom to Transform the Justice System: Monday, October 26 – Thursday, October 29, 2026 in Hawai‘i
 12. Support in documenting and amplifying project impact on AFCS website and other platforms
-

7. Expected Outcomes

Through this initiative, we aim to:

1. Support young adult partners in exercising vision, voice, agency and leadership in driving narrative transformation
2. Rich and meaningful learning for participants that inspires future efforts to transform laws, policies, institutions, narratives, systems and community-wide outcomes
3. Circulate new stories rooted in healing, justice, belonging, wellbeing, and collective thriving
4. Inspire broader cultural, systemic, and policy change through local action

8. Application Requirements

Applicants will be asked to submit:

1. **Basic Information** (name, age, location, contact info)
2. **Project Description** (3–5 pages):
 - The narrative you want to change
 - The story you want to uplift
 - Area of focus (e.g. justice, foster care, mental health, etc.)
 - Your planned activities, and timeline
 - Your goals and the intended impact of your project
 - Vision of change
 - Key Audience(s) for project
 - Platforms and/or strategies for dissemination and story sharing
 - Clearly delineate the phases of your project including identifying planning time (with dates articulated) that is separate from an implementation phase (with dates articulated)
3. **Community Impact:**
 - Who will be involved or reached
 - Which partners will you work with
 - Why this matters to you
 - How it connects to the [values](#), [goals](#), and [vision](#) of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions and the Opportunity Youth Forum
 - Why it's important to your peers, family, community, and the broader opportunity youth movement
 -
4. **Budget:**
 - Please include a detailed line-item budget detailing how funds will be used
 - Funds may be used to support artist stipends and/or youth leadership stipends, materials and supplies to cover project expenses, digital media production (e.g. the use of videos, audio support, design technology, and/or social media campaigns); organizing and hosting community events, workshops, and/or exhibits, travel expenses related to project activities, actions or convenings, and documentation and storytelling activities.
 - ***** If your application includes activities outside of this scope, please note this in your application as we are open to suggestions from applicants. *****
 - Please include a detailed, line-item budget that articulates projected expenses. We will partner closely with applicants if/as the budget line items change.

5. Youth Leadership Statement:

- Please submit a signed youth leadership statement sharing your commitment to participate in bi-weekly grantee meetings facilitated by Aspen leadership
- Please also include a statement sharing your commitment to submitting monthly 1-3 paragraph updates on your project to Aspen leadership
- If your plan includes engaging other youth leaders please articulate how they will be included in this project, share their intended role(s), stipends (if intended), key activities, planned outcomes, etc.
- How will youth lead decision-making and implementation?

9. Selection Criteria

Applications will be reviewed based on:

- 13. Alignment with narrative change and healing-centered approaches
- 14. Youth leadership and authenticity of voice
- 15. Creativity and clarity of vision
- 16. Community relevance and potential impact
- 17. Feasibility within the grant amount and timeline

10. Timeline (Tentative)

RFP released: Monday, January 26, 2026

Applications due: Monday, February 16, 2026

Awards announced: Friday, February 27, 2026

Projects begin: Monday, March 9, 2026

Project period: March 9, 2026 – December 31, 2026 (9 months)

11. Questions & Accessibility

We are committed to making this process accessible and youth centered. If you have questions, need accommodations, or want to talk through an idea before applying, support will be available via a zoom session with applicants invited to apply.

All applicants are invited to participate a webinar to learn more about this funding opportunity and/or ask questions about their impending applications. The date of the webinar is TBD and will be determined with the applicants

Youth are the narrators of the past, present, and future. Thank you for your consideration of this funding opportunity. We look forward to supporting your vision, stories, dreams, and impact.

Appendix D: Empathy Interview Template

Collective Care & Narrative Capacity Empathy Interview

Staff Experience, Relational Culture, and Narrative Infrastructure
Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions • Opportunity Youth Forum

Purpose

This empathy interview is designed to understand how collective care practices shape wellbeing and emotional sustainability, trust and belonging, and capacity for narrative change work.

This is not an evaluation. It is a learning tool to strengthen our culture, leadership, and systems.

Interview flow

Move through the four sections in order. Each builds on the previous, mirroring the developmental arc of the Theory of Action: care → trust → capacity → insight.

Interview context

Interview date	
Interviewer	
Participant role / team	
Tenure at AFCS	
Format	☐ 1:1 ☐ Group
Consent to share anonymized insights	☐ Yes ☐ No

Section 1

Wellbeing & collective care

Lived experience of care, healing, and emotional sustainability • Aligned with TOA Phase 1

☉ How are you arriving today — personally and professionally?

 **Interviewer note:** Start here. Set the tone. Listen for emotional texture, not just content. This question is not optional.

Notes: Arrival / emotional tone

☉ When you think about collective care on this team, what has that felt like for you in practice?

Deepening prompts (choose 1–2):

- What moments made you feel genuinely cared for here?
- Are there specific practices that stood out (e.g., onboarding, handwritten notes, retreats, check-ins)?
- What made those moments meaningful?

Notes: Care experiences

● Where does care feel real — and where does it feel less consistent or harder to access?

 **Interviewer note:** This is the truth probe. Create space for honesty. Don't rush past discomfort.

Notes: Where care is real vs. aspirational

Impact on wellbeing:

☐ Very positive ☐ Mixed ☐ Neutral ☐ Negative

Section 2

Connection, trust & belonging

Relational culture, psychological safety, and resilience • Aligned with TOA Phase 1–2

● When do you feel most connected to people on this team?

- What creates that sense of connection?
- Are there moments where you feel disconnected or outside of that?

Notes: Connection and belonging

● How does the culture here shape your willingness to be honest or take interpersonal risks?

▶ **Interviewer note:** Listen for psychological safety signals: truth-telling without retaliation, permission to disagree, comfort with vulnerability.

Notes: Psychological safety

● What allows you to stay in the work when things get hard — and what makes that harder?

- How does trust show up on this team? Where is it strong? Where is it fragile?
- Where do you feel stretched or at capacity?

Notes: Trust and resilience

Observed relational indicators (check all that apply):

- ☐ Psychological safety ☐ Mutual care ☐ Trust
☐ Silos ☐ Uneven belonging ☐ Fragile trust

Section 3

Narrative change capacity

Fluency, confidence, and readiness for narrative strategy work • Aligned with TOA Phase 2–3

● How do you understand your role in narrative change work?

- What helps you feel confident doing this work?
- What gets in the way?
- Where do you need more support, clarity, or tools?

Notes: Narrative role and confidence

● Where do you see the collective care plan most alive in practice — and where does it feel more aspirational than lived?

 **Interviewer note:** This bridges care and capacity. Listen for whether relational infrastructure is translating into strategic readiness.

Notes: Care plan → capacity connection

Narrative capacity self-assessment:

☐ High ☐ Moderate ☐ Emerging ☐ Limited

Observed capacity needs (check all that apply):

- ☐ Skill-building ☐ Alignment ☐ Time / space
☐ Leadership modeling ☐ Practice opportunities

Section 4

Tensions, truth & forward vision

Structural gaps, honest reflection, and recommendations • Aligned with TOA Phase 3–4

© What feels like a tension or contradiction in how we operate right now?

 **Interviewer note:** *This is where your richest data will come from. Hold space. Don't problem-solve in the moment.*

- Where are we relying on relationships where we may need more structure?
- Where does care exist — but systems don't support it?
- Where are we not fully naming what's true?

Notes: Tensions and contradictions

● Looking forward: what feels most important for us to keep, to change, and to act on urgently?

Keep:
Change:
Most urgent:

● Is there anything you wish I had asked that I didn't?

 **Interviewer note:** *Never skip this question. It often surfaces what the participant has been holding back.*

Notes: Unsolicited insight

Interviewer reflection (complete within 24 hours)

Emotional tone of interview	
Key quote to preserve	
Emerging patterns	
Alignment with survey data	☐ Strong ☐ Partial ☐ Tension
Follow-up needed	☐ Yes ☐ No
Follow-up notes	

“Transform yourself, to transform the world.” — Grace Lee Boggs