From Stories to Systems:
Using a Narrative Systems Approach to Inform Narrative Change Strategy
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The Pop Culture Collaborative was founded in October 2016 by a network of philanthropic leaders—primarily women of color—led by Unbound Philanthropy, Nathan Cummings Foundation, and Ford Foundation, who came together to imagine what might be possible if they expanded the impact of their grantmaking by pooling their resources, strategic thinking, and leadership influence to dramatically increase philanthropic investment in the pop culture for social change field.

After many years of experimental funding at the intersection of art, media, and social change, they recognized that due to a lack of infrastructure, networks, and financial support, many past grantmaking strategies (e.g., support for specific creative projects or campaigns) had been implemented in silos. While some funded projects succeeded in creating awakenings in individuals or smaller audiences, they seldom reached mass audience scale. Because they were also rarely implemented within a long-term culture change strategy, most projects were not durable enough to achieve long-term, sustainable shifts in some of the deeply entrenched values and norms that characterize American culture.

These funders realized that they were, in essence, squeezing drops of justice into an ocean largely composed of unjust ideas, rather than supporting a field of practitioners to holistically transform these narrative waters.

The Pop Culture Collaborative was imagined as a laboratory environment for the pop culture for social change field, designed to create an immersive learning and testing environment that could enable funders and field members to discover, together, how best to achieve this depth and scale of narrative transformation in the United States.

What follows is the story of what we’ve learned so far.
Imagination requested.

I’d like you to imagine a vast, swirling ocean. In this ocean, picture a tiny fish swimming around. (In the spirit of pop culture, let’s call him Nemo.) Nemo is doing fish things: eating plankton, checking in with his fish friends, going to fish school. Doing his life.

What Nemo is probably not doing is swimming around thinking, “Water. Water. I’m in water. There’s water all around me.” To Nemo, water isn’t water, it’s reality. It’s his world.

Like Nemo, we are all swimming in a kind of ocean—except instead of water swirling around us, there are narratives. And like Nemo, few of us walk through our days thinking, “Narrative. Narrative. There are narratives all around me.” And yet, these narratives are influencing everything about how we live, see and think about ourselves in the world. These narratives feel like reality to us—like the air we breathe. They are our world.

The hard truth is that large swaths of the narrative “ocean” in which we currently swim are toxic—poisoned with terrible ideas about who we are, who belongs, and who does not. On the best of days, these ideas make it hard to see through the muck. They distort our sense of self and our faith in our ability to meet each other across our differences. At worst, the ideas swirling in these narrative waters are killing some of us, and our planet. They are separating us from our families, stripping us of our freedom, and making us feel hopeless about our nation’s ability to become something other than divided, hurt, angry, and broken.

My question to you: In this toxic environment, what becomes of our imaginations? Our willingness to believe, fight, and build something new? And if this generative superpower is eroded, how can we see a future that could exist beyond this messy, brutal chapter in America’s story?

At the Pop Culture Collaborative, we are convinced that if social justice movements hope to one day create a just and pluralist society in the U.S., the pop culture for social change field—storytellers, organizers, researchers, cultural strategists, and funders—must commit to the hard work of transforming the narrative oceans in which we all swim.

The question is … how?
The Six Discoveries

The Pop Culture Collaborative’s long-term goal is to support the growth of a pop culture for social change field capable of building deep yearning in a true majority of Americans (more than 165 million people) to actively co-create a just and pluralist nation in which everyone is perceived to belong, inherently, and is treated as such.

Since 2017, Collaborative’s community (including staff, Managing Partners, grantees, Senior Fellows, and cohort members) has commissioned research; convened grantees for learning retreats, work sessions, and community gatherings; and conducted dozens of interviews with field practitioners. Across this work, we have investigated the question of how narratives and stories can become catalysts for widespread cultural change.

We also studied a range of long-term culture change processes—from political movements to consumer marketing strategies and the emergence of fandoms and subcultures—including marriage equality, trickle-down economics, the normalization of bottled water, the mainstreaming of 12-step recovery programs, and the global embrace of the Wakanda storyworld. As grantmakers, we did so because we needed to better understand how to efficiently contribute resources to the growth of a field capable of transforming the narrative oceans in which we are all immersed.

What we learned guides our thinking about how widespread cultural change happens, how the pop culture for social change field can help drive such change, and how philanthropy can support it to do so.

We now design and evolve our field building and grantmaking strategy with six key discoveries in mind:

1 | THE GOAL IS TO TRANSFORM NARRATIVE OCEANS.

First, as a broad sector, we need to challenge our impulse to change “the narrative” on a particular issue, and instead embrace the hard work of
transforming whole narrative oceans—that is, the ecosystems of narratives, ideas, and cultural norms that shape the behaviors, mindsets, and worldviews of millions of people. Efforts to change the narrative often result in specific one-directional communications plans, message frames, campaigns, or story projects that may have a short-term effect, but do not measurably transform cultural rules or norms. These tactics are akin to squeezing a drop of red food coloring into a vast ocean of blue water and expecting the ocean to turn purple. Our disparate stories and narrative experiences—the ink drops—may swirl in the water briefly, but they will quickly be consumed by the vast and voracious narrative waters that normalize injustice.

We believe that transforming entire narrative oceans is necessary, and that this change process begins when millions of people begin to experiment with new behaviors that, when embodied by a majority of people in a community or society, create the conditions for enduring shifts in cultural norms, and ultimately, in values and worldview.

2 | THE WORK IS TO ACHIEVE NARRATIVE IMMERSION.

To transform narrative oceans, we have to achieve a depth of narrative immersion such that people experience a fictional way of life as possible, and begin to express first yearning, then desire, and finally, demand for this fiction to be made real. The depth and scale of cultural change we seek simply cannot be achieved through philanthropy’s continued support only of individual, one-off story projects or campaigns. Instead, widespread cultural change is most reliably achieved when millions of people are immersed, over time, in new narrative oceans powered by a multitude of coordinated story experiences and organized communities (e.g., pop culture fancons) that express diverse and complex perspectives while also holding the same core ideas.

During a long-term culture change process, narrative immersion can occur in different ways and at different scales for different audiences. In some cases, smaller segments of people become immersed in different stories that carry similar ideas, and the cumulative effect of these different viewing experiences creates a shared experience of narrative immersion in a narrative ocean.

For instance, crime procedurals represent the majority of American television dramas on the air. While each show involves different characters and storylines, most share some key narrative ideas. “Almost
all of these shows make wrongful police behavior seem right,” writes Rashad Robinson of Color of Change, “presenting illegal, unethical, and immoral behavior on the part of police and other authorities as justifiable—or even necessary—while carefully rationalizing or otherwise dismissing any objections to that behavior... making heroes out of police who break the rules, violate our rights, and cause harm.”

Narrative immersion can also happen because a majority of people in a society are experiencing the same cultural moment at the same time. Because of the highly dispersed nature of our modern media landscape, with thousands of television networks and online media outlets, streaming services, and social networks deteriorating our access to communal experience, these moments of shared immersion are rare. Election night in 2008 immersed millions of Americans in an experience of pluralist euphoria that reverberated around the world; and the #BlackLivesMatter groundswells of 2014 and 2020 have fundamentally recomposed the narrative ocean around policing for many Americans.

3 | TO ACHIEVE NARRATIVE IMMERSION, FUND NARRATIVE NETWORKS.

The sheer scale and depth of narrative immersion we need can’t possibly be achieved by one organization, company, or person. By studying a range of sectors that have achieved large-scale narrative immersion in new ideas, narratives, and behavioral norms—the entertainment industry, Civil Rights and marriage equality movements, anti-smoking and other health advocacy programs, governments, corporate brands, educational systems, and religious communities—our team came to understand that they all rely on broad, cross-sector, coordinated narrative networks of individuals, groups, and institutions we call narrative drivers.

To build narrative power—by creating deep narrative immersion in new narrative environments—philanthropy must substantially expand the resources available to field practitioners to work together with shared goals and intentionally aligned narrative and cultural strategies.  

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3 In 2020, the Pop Culture Collaborative launched the Becoming America Fund as the primary site in which we are testing what it takes to design, activate, and evaluate a narrative systems approach and the funding of narrative networks. In Spring 2022, we will share a new narrative network design and evaluation framework based on learnings and the evaluation of the first cycle of Becoming America grantmaking.
Our analysis also revealed one component common to many successful culture change processes: an intentionally designed and activated narrative system—a framework that outlines the coordinated ecosystem of pop culture stories, narrative archetypes, mental models, and behavioral norms that are designed to work together to gradually replace one narrative ocean with a new one. While new narrative oceans emerge in many ways, use of a narrative system framework can dramatically accelerate the pace at which a new narrative environment takes shape. Moreover, when a narrative network shares a clear culture shift goal, theory for how a new narrative ocean will evolve, and a strategic framework that operationalizes this theory, this network can attain far greater reach and coordination, and, ultimately, narrative transformation.

“What lies beyond inclusion?” I first posed this question to panelists at a pop culture summit our Managing Partners hosted in Los Angeles in 2016. Together, the speakers—organizer Rashad Robinson, filmmaker Patricia Riggen, actor Daniel Dae Kim, and production executive Andrew Wang—considered whether Hollywood's longstanding goals of diversity and inclusion were enough to achieve justice and equity for BIPOC artists and other communities harmed by the stories generated by this powerful industry.

A year later, on separate occasions, I asked Alice Sheppard and Lawrence Carter-Long, prominent disability inclusion advocates and artists, the same question. Both helped shape a theory that has since become a cornerstone of our grantmaking approach: “If access is being able to get into a party, and inclusion is being invited to the party, then innovation is when you are the one throwing the party—and maybe even reimagining how a party is thrown.”

Their analysis reaffirmed an instinct our team has had since that panel in 2016: representation and inclusion are not sufficient goals for our work. As philanthropic and entertainment industry funders and financiers, we need to expand our scope to include support for innovation in storytelling—new pipelines, incubators, production funds, technologies, and creative processes that center the agency and vision of people historically excluded from sites of power and harmed by toxic narratives.
many of them reinforced by content and platforms generated by Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and other pop culture industries.

It is our belief that this approach will more reliably build power within these communities and spark new narrative oceans in the United States that are rooted in justice, equity, and pluralist belonging.

6 | PROFESSIONALS, FANS, AND COMMUNITIES ARE ALL CREATORS

From Stories to Systems explores one layer of narrative system design and activation—specifically, the process whereby professional entertainment and cultural sector artists, creatives, and storytellers work alongside cultural strategists, researchers, and movement organizers to produce and distribute content in alignment with a narrative system.

Ultimately, however, our team believes a robust narrative systems approach must include frameworks and strategy reflecting at least three layers of narrative systems process: 1) how professional arts and entertainment storytellers create content and experiences to seed new narrative oceans; 2) how digital-first creators inform and impact narrative oceans, from creating and disseminating their own content, to organizing fandoms and other communities that drive cultural conversations; and 3) how professional and nonprofessional storytellers and digital-first creators work symbiotically and equitably with grassroots communities to conduct participatory research and narrative design, produce content, and activate narrative systems.

Future publications and learning tools will explore the theory and frameworks that shape our understanding of these two additional layers, as well as the interplay between the three levels of narrative system design and activation.
Why Narrative Systems?

To answer this question, I’d like to begin with a story. It’s an astonishingly simple story. In fact, it has only six words:

**America is the land of opportunity.**

During our research and discovery process, this story captivated us. This epic tale—of a land where the streets are paved with gold and anyone willing to work hard has an equal shot at the good life—has inspired millions of immigrants to endure long journeys over land and sea to reach American soil.

We wondered, *How did this story survive for so many generations? How did it migrate around the world? Why does it have such power, particularly given how many aspects of American culture and history seem to contradict this tale of possibility and opportunity?*

What soon became clear was that even a story as powerful as this one could not have survived for so long if it did not live at the heart of a narrative ocean that constantly reinforces the core ideas of **American opportunity**: rugged individualism; a fierce devotion to the pursuit of wealth and the power to dominate; the glamorizing of competition; the devaluing of people unable to escape poverty; the sanctity of the heteronormative nuclear family.

Many people assume that this narrative ocean evolved organically, naturally following the currents of culture until it became the bedrock of American exceptionalist ideology that it is today. Of course, that isn’t the whole story. For centuries, ship captains, slave traders, politicians, merchants, migrants, artists, and journalists told and retold this tale of opportunity.

But in the 1950s, during the early days of the mass media era, the U.S. government took the bold step of partnering with Madison Avenue ad agencies, corporate brands, and network television executives to conceptualize an ecosystem of stories aimed at promoting middle class ascendancy and home ownership to white working class people. This intervention, which firmly tied American success to the goalposts of marriage, home, and family, harnessed the emergent power of pop culture—movies, commercials, television shows, music, print ads—to
broadly disseminate images of smiling, white, heterosexual married couples living in new homes with their happy children. These iconic characters, always white, drove to their good jobs in shiny new cars, brushed their teeth in glistening new bathrooms, and worked hard to keep up with the Joneses who lived down the street in their quaint cul de sac communities. Steadily, pop culture stories worked to normalize this interpretation of the American Dream.

Over time, this narrative system created a new—fictional—reality in the public imagination. No longer needing the system’s creators to generate content in pop culture, artists, politicians, faith leaders, news anchors and journalists, parents, and teachers began to riff on these stories to create their own. From Father Knows Best to The Brady Bunch, and in the wake of the Civil Rights era, The Jeffersons to The Cosby Show, an active call and response took shape: stories inspired more stories, which compelled more stories. The American Dream narrative system generated a self-sustaining narrative ocean that persists to this day.

Social justice movements were not immune to the power of this narrative system. When Martin Luther King Jr. uttered the words, “I have a dream” in 1968, and the marriage equality movement declared “Love Is Love” 40 years later, they were both strategically tapping into the core ideas of the American Dream narrative system to increase their resonance and build narrative power.

The tension here is, of course, that this narrative system wasn’t designed with the best interests of most of us in mind. In truth, it effectively served as an invitation to millions of working class white people to embrace their privilege and lean into the comfort they felt in white homogenous spaces. Black and Indigenous people, people of color, immigrants, women, queer, transgender, and disabled people have placed our lives and bodies on the line in an effort to belong in this ruthlessly inequitable story of American opportunity. But this narrow vision has never actually suited us. Like hand-me-down jeans—or a vise—this reality pinches our skin, restricts our movement, and leaves us feeling like failures of the very dream we hold so dear.

Maybe it’s time we let it go.
Seeding Narrative Systems

The proliferation of the American Dream narrative ocean illustrates how narrative systems can take shape through intentional, organized collaborations among different entities or sectors that function as a centralizing force within a broader narrative network. As discussed, the *Love Is Love* narrative system generally follows this process of collaboratively designed strategy and activation by a multi-sector narrative network spanning movements, advertising, the arts, entertainment, and big media.

But narrative systems can also emerge from the bottom up, when a specific story experience sparks a pattern of similar stories that form an immersive narrative ocean over time. Such was the case with the narrative ocean that normalized cops as heroes. In her groundbreaking 2016 series exploring Hollywood’s nearly 100 years of collaboration with police departments, *Washington Post* columnist Alyssa Rosenberg tells the tale of how a 1940s television actor planted the seed for a narrative ocean that would ultimately fuel decades of police violence:

Jack Webb got the idea for *Dragnet* when he met Marty Wynn, an LAPD detective who was working as technical adviser for a movie in which Webb played a forensics investigator. In pursuit of the access that would let him market *Dragnet* as an authentic look at police work, Webb forged an extraordinary partnership with LAPD chief William Parker and department publicity wizard Stanley Sheldon—accepting stringent censorship from the police department in exchange for story ideas, logistical help, and a patina of truth. That bargain would help create America’s first enduring cop drama and a model for police storytelling for decades to come… The show quickly became a model.⁴

While this inter-industry collaboration sought to distort the truth about police and communities of color, other stories have sparked narrative patterns, and ultimately, narrative systems that have dramatically expanded public imagination about who we are and what we are capable of. When the COVID-19 pandemic began to shut down economies and communities around the world in early 2020, a new tradition emerged:

nightly applause for the doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff who were on the frontlines of the medical response. The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)—a social justice organization representing over 2 million childcare workers, home health aids, and house cleaners—recognized that hospitals were not the only frontlines of this crisis. Acting quickly, NDWA and allies like Color of Change and Resilience Force began to tell the story of the largely BIPOC and immigrant care workers, construction workers, food delivery workers, and farm workers who were also essential to the nation’s crisis response. This story gradually became the norm in movements, philanthropy, journalism, public discourse, and ultimately, public policy. The positioning of care work as infrastructure in federal budget proposals would not have happened without the narrative power that these grassroots communities built.

Similarly, when sci-fi authors and Hollywood screenwriters first began partnering with scientists to tell the story of what the future looked like, their depictions were full of wonder, making the prospect of interplanetary travel, discovery, and coexistence feel exciting. In this vision of the future, depictions of pluralist culture were widespread, challenging viewers to imagine new ways of relating to one another, navigating complex shifts in power, defending justice, and overcoming xenophobia. (It's no surprise that Star Trek was the only show Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. allowed his children to stay up late to watch in the 1960s.)

Early sci-fi stories sparked a pattern of storytelling that gave birth to a genre that seeded a new narrative ocean. From Star Trek to The Expanse and the Afrofuturist metropolis of Wakanda, this narrative ocean helps audiences to believe in a future of boundless possibility, where curiosity leads to incredible discoveries, and daring to step out of our familiar realms to forge bonds with people—and species—different from us makes us more powerful and whole.

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How Narrative Systems Work

The Collaborative’s narrative systems approach is predicated on the belief—reinforced by George Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory\(^6\) and other social, neuro, and cognitive science—that when consistently immersed in pop culture storyworlds that carry transformative ideas, characters, behaviors, and ways of living, people begin to feel that the alternate realities depicted in these worlds are not only possible, they are preferable.

Grounded in this belief and guided by evidence emerging across our field, our operating theory supports the idea that these pop culture storyworlds—seeded by professional storytellers (in entertainment, the arts, advertising, and media), social justice organizers, fans, and community-based creators from historically excluded communities and coordinated through a narrative system—can produce cultural change at scale.

To refine our thinking, our staff, Managing Partners, and a working group of grantees and partners\(^7\) worked with Senior Fellow Ryan Senser and his research partner Eleanor Morison over an 18-month period to develop a narrative system framework that expresses a theory of how new narrative environments can take shape across large-scale culture. This framework seeks to clarify the components of a narrative system (and the relationship between them): the culture shift goal, mental models, narrative archetypes, specific stories, inciting experiences, and desired behavioral norms.

A bit later, we will define these terms, but first, I want to share our theory of how narrative systems drive towards a specific culture change goal. It goes like this:

Specific pop culture stories—shaped by narrative archetypes that carry new mental models into the cultural waters—gradually spark an inciting experience or series of experiences that inspire people to experiment with new behaviors. These behaviors, when

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\(^7\) Please see Appendix for a list of all participants in the Pop Culture Collaborative’s narrative system co-design process.
routinely embodied by a person, gradually diffuse harmful mental models, creating space for these new mental models to live and thrive in the imagination. These new mental models and behaviors, once expressed by millions of people, create the momentum needed to achieve a specific culture change goal.

Let’s break this down.

**CULTURE CHANGE GOAL**

During the narrative system design process, collaborators may spend significant time constructing the culture change goal. That’s because this goal reflects both the vision and the mandate that will guide a narrative network throughout multiple years of implementation. Ideally, the goal is simple and pragmatic, while still expressing bold ambition and emotional stakes.

For instance, the Pop Culture Collaborative has established the following culture change goal:

**Goal:** To support the growth of a pop culture for social change field capable of building deep yearning in a true majority of Americans (more than 165 million people) to actively co-create a just and pluralist nation in which everyone is perceived to belong, inherently, and is treated as such.

Let’s dig into the construction of this goal.

First, the goal defines the role of cultural strategies in relation to the broader social change process: the pop culture for social change field’s role is not to create the systems and structures of a just society. That is the work of social justice movement organizations and elected officials, with whom practitioners in the pop culture for social change field are often deeply aligned. Instead, **this field’s role is to use pop culture stories and other narrative experiences to activate the imagination, emotional life, and desire for change in people such that the structural solutions offered by movements feel like answers to people’s deep yearning.**

Second, the goal explicitly defines the desired scale of audience the Collaborative seeks to reach in partnership with grantees, fellows, Managing Partners, and other allies: at least 165 million people. These
words serve as a constant reminder of our mandate to invest in the field’s ability to routinely engage the majority of people in the United States.

Third, the goal reflects the new way of life the Collaborative seeks: a nation rooted in **pluralist culture**, which we define as “a cultural condition in which the majority of people in a community or nation are actively engaged in the hard and delicate work of belonging together in a just society.”

**NARRATIVE ARCHETYPES**

Numerous efforts are underway to define what narratives are. Many of these definitions involve a lot of words, sentences, and semicolons. We have found it helpful to distinguish between a passive definition, i.e., one that helps clarify meaning on a philosophical level, and a strategic definition that helps those designing strategy to stay aligned in their methodology.

This is perhaps controversial, but in the context of designing a narrative system, I will venture to say that it doesn’t really matter how we define “a narrative.” Instead, it is critical that cultural strategists, artists, organizers, and grantmakers begin to share an understanding of the definition and function of **narrative archetypes** in the context of narrative systems.

They are the tools of our trade.

Specifically, we need to understand the two ways that narrative archetypes function in the context of narrative strategy. First, we need to analyze how they populate and shape the narrative oceans we swim in. This is why we study them during the narrative research and analysis phase of a narrative system design process. And second, we need to recognize how they live in the imaginations and craft of artists who draw upon them to create the stories we all enjoy.

*Let’s begin in the narrative waters.*

A narrative archetype is a story that recurs in culture such that its meaning is understood by most people. The Collaborative community has come to think about narrative archetypes in this way:
**Narrative Archetype:** a story people already know; a story template that most people recognize and to which most people have a reliable response.\(^8\)

The most powerful, transformative stories in our culture are not new stories. They are often very old stories that have been told again and again in different forms by different people over hundreds if not thousands of years. Because of our familiarity with them, such stories operate like narrative road maps in our individual (and collective) imagination. When the story is activated in our minds, we immediately recognize it, know how it unfolds, and who the heroes and villains are, understand the stakes, and anticipate the conclusion. Think *Romeo and Juliet*.

I often joke that narrative archetypes function in our psyches like ‘80s pop songs on the radio. When the first few notes of John Cougar Mellencamp’s “Jack and Diane” or Lionel Richie’s “All Night Long” burst through the car speakers, I’m often surprised (and mortified!) to discover that I can belt every word at the top of my lungs without ever having memorized the words. *Who put those lyrics in my head?* Likely, there is no one culprit; rather, repeated exposure to these songs over time has embedded them, and their meaning, in my brain.

In 2018, I was invited to speak at a pop culture for social change retreat in Dartington, England. Here, among more than 100 talented and respected artists and activists, I had the thrilling opportunity to lead this very British group in an impromptu choral performance of Celine Dion’s “All By Myself,” made famous in the film *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. It was one of the highlights of my career to witness the startled, slightly horrified looks on some faces as the words fell from their mouths, as if by magic. After the performance, we talked about the big ideas carried deep into our consciousness by songs like this: the tragic nature of singledom, the importance of being loved or at least wanted, the societal pressure to see companionship or marriage as a sign of personal completion.

“All By Myself” is a pop culture story shaped by narrative archetypes including the stories of lost love and the Phoenix rising. Celine Dion’s iconic crescendo at the end of the song can be interpreted as a clear signal of the protagonist’s choice to defy her sad fate and live to love another day. The song follows an old, familiar story template, and as a result, the ideas in the song resonate deeply. And they stick.

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Mapping people’s familiarity with different iconic story templates is essential work for narrative and cultural strategy designers. When members of a narrative network—artists, strategists, movement leaders, journalists, advertisers, political leaders, educators—analyze how these narrative archetypes function in the imagination of a target audience, we gain a more sophisticated understanding of how new stories can spark shifts in thought and behavior.

**Now let’s look at narrative archetypes in the creative process.**

I mentioned earlier that understanding the function of narrative archetypes matters for two reasons. First, this analysis helps us to get to better ideas during the strategy design process, whether it be for the planning of culture change processes or grantmaking programs. Second, when artists and other content creators leverage narrative archetypes to give shape to the films, television shows, songs, books, social videos, op-eds, speeches, lesson plans, and other story experiences we create every day, they can touch a chord that activates people in specific ways.

Let’s return to our young lovers in Verona. If I said to you, “This is a Romeo and Juliet kind of story,” what would that mean to you? Likely, if you have attended high school in the U.S. and other European-colonized cultures, you would know that the story I’m going to tell you was about love. Ill-fated, tragic, epic love, to be precise. You might also know that the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet is not only that two young people lose their lives, but that the broader society (embodied by their parents and adults) is so incapable of honoring and protecting the beauty of their love that they destroy it. You would understand that the story I’m about to share is about love and societal failure.

Shakespeare’s tale of young love gone terribly awry is based on the very old stories of “star-crossed lovers” that have recurred so often in Indigenous, Islamic, West African, Roman, and other cultures that most people know some version of the story by heart. Thanks to a legion of sacred texts, plays, novels, pop songs, and films, this story template has traveled far and wide in American culture and beyond.

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9 The Pop Culture Collaborative studied this narrative archetype during our immersion in The Narrative Forest, an installation curated by Ryan Senser and Eleanor Morison for our Narrative System Design cohort retreat in March 2018. This project analyzed more than a dozen narrative archetypes that live in the public imagination and could shape content designed to create a narrative ocean that reinforces pluralist culture.
Now imagine that a filmmaker used this story template—of great love destroyed by societal failure—to tell the story of two American teens. One was born in the U.S. with citizenship and the other was born in Haiti and undocumented. The artist’s choice to tap into this narrative archetype is strategic: it casts these young people as brave heroes; characterizes their love as precious, rare, and worth fighting for; and signals to you, their audience, that this story won’t end well. It also produces a visceral response to injustice. Most important, it allows your imagination to intuitively identify the villain in the story as whomever is thwarting their ability to freely express their love—in this case, parents whose bigoted attitudes prevent them from seeing the power of this couple’s love. As with *Romeo and Juliet*, the story also indicts the broader society that shaped the parents’ views (for instance, racist politicians and law enforcement whose values are corrupt and out of date). Because we know how this story ends and have already created meaning around these characters, this artist’s story might make your heart hurt, or leave you distraught, yearning for the world to be a place where authentic love can thrive, and everyone can belong. It may spark a bitterness towards unfairness. With a strong audience experience strategy around this story, you might even feel resolved to do something to ensure that teen love can never be torn apart by cruel immigration policies and racist beliefs.

Now, what if the same artist instead tapped into the “boy meets girl” narrative archetype to tell this tale of teen love? How would that story unfold? What are the key plot points? What is the element of suspense in the story? How does it likely end? Chances are, if you grew up on a healthy diet of pop culture rom-coms, you already know.

So does your audience. That’s the power of narrative archetypes in the story creation process.

**MENTAL MODELS**

Earlier, I shared a story expressing our theory of how pop culture stories can drive narrative immersion: *pop culture stories, shaped by powerful narrative archetypes, carry new mental models into the cultural waters.*

In the case of the “star-crossed lovers” narrative archetype, a range of ideas are carried into people’s imaginations. One is that love *should* conquer all. This idea is so pervasive, so dominant in the American psyche, that when many of us hear a story that carries this idea, we instinctively accept it as true and right, and make sense within the
storyworld (and the real world) accordingly. When we are immersed in a story that carries ideas that contradict this mental model, our imaginations will instinctively reject the story—and often, the storyteller—as wrong, poorly executed, out of sync.

This idea, that great, passionate love can and should overcome cruelty and corruption, and be protected at all costs, is an example of what many narrative strategists refer to as a **mental model**.

Here is the definition that we have found helpful:

**Mental model**: a foundational idea about the world and how it works that drives behavior and either enables consent or sparks rejection of certain conditions or propositions.¹⁰

If narrative archetypes are the vehicles through which we create stories that can change people and the world, mental models are the passengers, carried by these narrative archetypes and story experiences into the public imagination and the narrative oceans of a society.

Narrative and cultural strategists working to advance social justice are painfully aware that narrative archetypes can also carry inhumane mental models to audiences. While many people experience *Romeo and Juliet* and walk away with the idea that love should conquer all, there are others who connect to a very different idea from this story. Perhaps, for them, the death of these young lovers reinforces the idea that unbridled love should be avoided. It’s too painful, even risky. Perhaps this mental model more closely aligns with their lived experience of heartbreak, isolation, or trauma. It might reinforce the ideas that shape the dominant narrative ocean in their particular culture, like the real danger of forbidden love across the borders of race, gender, or class. To these people, the dominant mental model is that love is dangerous. It makes us vulnerable or unsafe, while the idea that love should conquer all is more deeply buried in their psyches, fragile and delicate.

This seems like a good time to acknowledge that the human psyche is gloriously messy. We each hold thousands of contradictory mental models in our subconscious. Some are prosocial and generative. Others, not so much.

¹⁰ Source: Ryan Senser.
At a Pop Culture Collaborative narrative system working group meeting held in December 2018, participants discussed the concept of gravity. Ryan Senser pointed out that “this mental model helps us understand that if we step off a cliff, we will likely fall and break numerous bones. It keeps us safe.” Others, like the scarcity mindset, or a mindset that leads us to feel that love, connection, and empathy only endanger us, are harmful. These mental models can lead us to accept rhetoric that tells us that we don’t have room for more immigrants, that forging caring bonds with people different from us will only end badly, and that opportunity is finite.

In a narrative system design process, mental model analysis is essential. The work involves identifying the dominant and submerged mental models that live in millions of people, analyzing whether they are helpful or harmful in relationship to our culture shift goal, and finally, engaging in the process of strategically articulating transformative mental models that can, over time, spark a transformation of a person’s worldview.

Narrative and cultural strategists use audience research, including cultural trend analysis, community listening, quantitative studies, and other methods, to scan the cultural landscape to surface mental models and assess which ones are dominant and harmful, and which ones are submerged and prosocial. Through the use of narrative and cultural strategies, especially pop culture story experiences, narrative networks can gradually replace mental models that are harmful with mental models that are just and pluralist. (For instance, the Pop Culture Collaborative’s new Becoming America Fund will support grantees and other partners to replace the Scarcity mental model with a mental model rooted in Abundance.)

Unlike a communications message, which reaches the public in press releases, campaign documents, published essays, and similar communications, mental models operate at the level of an architectural blueprint: they are components of the narrative system framework that enable a narrative network to stay aligned as they design, test, and implement a strategy aimed at seeding a new narrative ocean.

For an overview of a number of audience research methods, we invite you to read the Pop Culture Collaborative’s recently published funder learning tool, Grantmaking Strategy Spotlight: Culture Change Research, at https://bit.ly/culturechangeresearch.
This distinction between a communications message and a mental model is critical: mental models should never—ever—be confused with public-facing messages or content. The written articulation of mental models, a component of the narrative system blueprint, is the inner scaffolding of a strategy or story concept, not the end product.

**STORY EXPERIENCES**

As a reminder, the goal of a narrative system design and activation process is to catalyze an ecosystem of coordinated stories—an immersive narrative ocean—that reflect and reinforce transformative mental models and behavioral norms. In this narrative ocean, different kinds of stories play different roles in the culture change process.

I’d like to focus on five types of stories: pop culture experiences, spectacles, revelations of belonging, “big sky” moments, and portal moments.

- **Pop Culture Experiences**
  In the narrative system activation stage, artists and story strategists leverage the power of narrative archetypes to tell wildly diverse stories that all carry the same underlying mental models into the cultural waters.

  These stories can take the form of movies, television shows, digital content, advertisements, songs and music videos, books, video and board games, immersive experiential projects, VR/AR, fan-generated content and cosplay, news stories, essays, and even political speeches. The common thread: they are shaped by narrative archetypes and enable people to repeatedly interact with transformative mental models and behavioral norms.

  We often relish the things that make our stories unique, but in the narrative change field, “we have to be just as interested in the big ideas that our stories share in common.”

- **Spectacles**
  As new narrative oceans take shape, a specific story experience can operate like a vortex around which the broader

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ecosystem of coordinated stories begins to swirl. These are “spectacle moments”—stories that most tightly express the core ideas of a narrative system, and help audiences interpret other stories they encounter through the lens of specific mental models or behavioral norms.

The image of millions of pink hats flooding the streets of America and globally during the first Women’s March in 2017 was a spectacle that expressed the story of a rising pro-Democracy movement in the U.S. and globally. Likewise, the image of the Black Lives Matter letters painted on the street leading to the White House—or of activist Bree Newsome scaling the flagpole to yank down the Confederate flag from South Carolina’s state capitol during the 2015 Black Lives Matter uprisings—conveyed the story of a youthful, defiant movement rising to power in the wake of tragedy.

- **Revelations of Belonging**
  As more and more people become immersed in a new narrative ocean, and begin to experiment with new behaviors, individuals may experience revelatory moments in which they discover that many people share the same private beliefs, yearnings or pain points as they do. The awareness of their place in a crowd of like-minded people is an important meaning-making moment in a person’s journey of change. Often, the realization that their views or beliefs are also experienced by many others inspires the confidence a person needs to more publicly test new behaviors once deemed too dangerous or unpopular to express.

In a Kaiser Family Foundation poll conducted in June 2020, researchers found that 10% of the U.S. population had “personally attended a protest or rally in the last 3 months either to protest police violence or in support of Black Lives Matter or other anti-racist causes,” making them collectively among the largest protests in U.S. history. In these crowds were millions of people of every race, younger and older, in cities, suburbs, and rural towns, who were likely attending their first protests against anti-Blackness. There are a myriad of reasons why people embraced new behaviors, but one of them

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was surely the effect of discovering, through social media posts and news stories, that millions of other people also yearned to stand up and cry no to America’s legacy of racial terror.

- **“Big Sky” Moments**
  When Ryan Coogler and the Walt Disney Company released the first *Black Panther* film during Black Futures Month in 2018, it’s fair to say that American culture was transformed. In every corner of our lives, celebration and discussion of Blackness—our culture, genius, joy, creative innovation, and resilience in the face of generational trauma—moved centerstage. This was what we call a “big sky” narrative moment, when the majority of people in a community or society are all looking up at the same narrative sky. Achieving this scale of narrative immersion requires intention, long-term strategy, and the nimbleness to constantly track cultural currents and sense opportunities before most people see a glimpse of light on the horizon.

- **Portal Moments**
  Often born out of crisis, disaster, or other great change, portal moments are unplanned but cataclysmic events that force an abrupt cracking open of the public imagination about what is possible, where old habits of life and society are destabilized to such an extent that the prospect of a new way of living suddenly feels reasonable, even necessary, for our survival. Crises become portal moments when narrative drivers—social justice organizers, pop culture storytellers, journalists, educators, and/or politicians—use narrative strategies to make meaning out of them.

  Millions of people began to view the COVID-19 crisis as a portal moment when Arundhati Roy’s searing essay, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” spread like wildfire on social media, normalizing the story of the pandemic as an opportunity for humankind to leave behind old, outdated ways of being in order to step onto a path towards justice. Similarly, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade sparked a national crisis that the movement for

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Black Lives transformed into a portal moment that has accelerated the pace at which deep systemic change can be achieved.

Not all crises lead to prosocial portal moments. September 11th was a tragic event that could have deepened America’s bonds with the global community. Instead, the government sparked an ocean of narrative experiences—including press stories, political speeches, legal briefs, TV and film storylines, and military ad campaigns—that reinforced a harmful story about the inherent danger of Muslim people and cultures. Gradually, politicians amassed the narrative power needed to advance catastrophic legislation, cultural norms, and mental models. Today, over 20 years later, we are still climbing out of this toxic narrative ocean. Narratives tested shortly after 9/11 have helped legitimize migrant abuse, the Muslim ban, the hyper-militarization of and surveillance by law enforcement, the expansion of mass incarceration, and much more.

It’s worth repeating: crises become portal moments when narrative networks help people interpret them as such. In the fight for social justice, philanthropy needs to invest in the narrative infrastructure that will enable the pop culture for social change field to recognize portal moments as they emerge, and effectively shape how the American public makes meaning out of them.

Together, pop culture stories, spectacle moments, revelations of belonging, and when present, “big sky” and portal moments, work together to churn the waters of an existing narrative ocean, gradually transforming these waters to reflect just ideas and behavioral norms.

INCITING EXPERIENCES

Deep immersion in a continuum of coordinated stories, shaped by narrative archetypes and carrying new mental models, can over time

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15 To learn more about how narrative tropes in pop cultures have shaped public perception of Muslim communities, read Haqq and Hollywood: 100 Years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them by Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellow Dr. Maytha Alhassen at https://haqqandhollywood.com.

16 In 2021, cultural strategist Erin Potts partnered with the Pop Culture Collaborative’s Chief Strategy Officer Tracy Van Slyke to publish The Speed of Trust: Accelerating Narrative Change Through Rapid Response in Pop Culture, exploring the resources and infrastructure the pop culture for social change field needs in order to be ready for rapid response moments. Read the report at https://popcollab.org/learning/the-speed-of-trust.
spark an **inciting experience** that fundamentally reorients a person’s understanding of themselves and/or the world around them.

**Inciting Experience:** a profound experience of transformation in which a person changes in ways that lead them to behave differently than before, often making choices and taking actions in a manner in keeping with the new mental models that have replaced harmful ones.\(^\text{17}\)

Inciting experiences can be born out of a deep engagement or investment in a new narrative environment infused with pop culture content. Initially, such an experience may produce curiosity and recognition. Gradually, the idea of living in a world more like the fictional world becomes preferable to reality, ultimately producing an emotional yearning for a new way of life. These experiences can change beliefs and assumptions, motivations, relationships, and expectations of and a sense of accountability to others.

When these inciting experiences are multiplied in large-scale culture, a collective yearning emerges and can evolve into widespread desire and, subsequently, majoritarian demand to make fiction real—to co-create the culture, systems, and norms that transform imagined ways of being into an actual new way of life. When shaped by pluralist values and mental models, this public mandate, and the ideas that have shaped it, create a more hospitable cultural condition in which social justice organizations can advocate and organize for enduring structural change.

**DESIRED BEHAVIORS**

Pop culture stories, shaped by powerful narrative archetypes and carrying transformative mental models, can inspire people to experiment with new behaviors.

**Desired Behaviors:** a set of normalized behaviors that effects meaningful social change when scaled across society among individuals and groups.\(^\text{18}\)

New behaviors, expressed routinely by most people in a culture or community, create new cultural norms and enduring values. For example,

\(^{17}\) Source: Ryan Senser.

\(^{18}\) Source: Ryan Senser.
the Collaborative has identified a set of pluralist behaviors that we believe pop culture storytellers are uniquely positioned to normalize in American culture. One is the instinct to step out of one’s familiar realms to cross borders—emotional, cultural, political, and/or geographic—and forge bonds with people different from us. If most Americans routinely expressed this culturally fluid behavior, we could become a society driven by more expansive concepts of identity, borders, and relationships to land.
The System Framework

Before you begin exploring the enclosed Narrative System Framework, let’s revisit the theory I shared of how pop culture stories can drive widespread cultural change:

Specific **pop culture stories**—shaped by **narrative archetypes** that carry new **mental models** into the cultural waters—gradually spark an **inciting experience or series of experiences** that inspire people to experiment with new **behaviors**. These behaviors, when routinely embodied by a person, gradually diffuse harmful mental models, creating space for these new mental models to live and thrive in the imagination. These new mental models and behaviors, once expressed by millions of people, create the momentum needed to achieve a specific **culture change goal**.

Now take a look at the enclosed Narrative System Framework. You can see how this story plays out along a single strand of the overall system framework: **narrative archetypes (NA)** shape specific stories experiences (S), which gradually create an **inciting experience (E)** that moves new mental models (MM) into the cultural waters and our deep imagination, inspiring us to experiment with new behaviors (B).\(^{19}\)

You’ll also notice that some components of the strand are different sizes. This is intended to denote the comparative significance of this system component in the process of designing or activating the system.

Now, let’s zoom out and look at the entire framework, which illustrates how a coordinated set of narrative archetypes, stories, inciting experiences, and mental models work together to create an immersive narrative ocean that inspires people to test new behaviors, and ultimately express new norms and values.

This framework is intended to be read in two directions:

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\(^{19}\) Findings from our investigation of the role of Core Motivators (M) in the narrative system design process will be shared in future learning tools.
A TOOL FOR NARRATIVE SYSTEM DESIGN

Read from the inside out, the framework becomes a mechanical tool in the narrative system design process, helping strategy teams (including both field practitioners and grantmakers) define the desired behavioral norms they seek, and the new mental models, inciting experiences, specific stories, and narrative archetypes that they believe can inspire people to experiment with new behaviors.

A TOOL FOR SYSTEM ACTIVATION

Read from the outside in, the framework becomes a road map for the narrative system activation process, helping a narrative network stay aligned through the implementation stages required to create new narrative oceans: narrative archetypes shape the creation of a content universe of specific stories and other narrative experiences that carry new mental models into the cultural waters, sparking inciting experiences that gradually replace harmful mental models with transformative ones, and inspire new behaviors.

Take some time to explore this Narrative System Framework. Notice what makes sense to you, and where you still have questions.
Narrative System Framework

A TOOL FOR STRATEGY DESIGN AND ACTIVATION

Framework and Visual Concept by Ryan Senser | Creative Direction by Pop Culture Collaborative

**Motivator**

**Core Motivator**
The primary motivating emotional driver that a narrative both taps into and embodies, the main source of a narrative’s power to influence us.

**Narrative Archetype**
A character template recurring in a culture over time that people widely recognize and understand, to which they have a predictable response.

**Specific Story**
A story expressed through an individual piece (or series) of content, rooted in a narrative archetype, carrying with it a set of mental models.

**Inciting Experience**
An experience of storytelling (i.e., immersion in a narrative and the mental models it seeds) that reinforces or shifts someone’s worldview.

**Mental Model (Embedded Idea)**
A deeply embedded, foundational understanding about the world and how it works, which generally directs or even compels our behaviors, and also leads us to accept or reject present conditions or propositions.

**Desired Behaviors**
A set of habitual and normalized behaviors that effects meaningful social change when scaled across society (among individual and groups).
The Road Ahead

As a queer, disabled Black woman, artist, cultural strategist, and funder, I engage in narrative and culture change work while navigating a painful truth: while narrative systems methodology builds on the legacy of prosocial worldbuilding practiced around the world over thousands of years—in which people told and retold stories and myths in order to cultivate shared social values, history and culture—these methodologies have been misappropriated, distorted, and weaponized by authoritarian governments, religious factions, and other toxic forces in order to spread harmful disinformation designed to divide, dehumanize, and oppress millions of people, especially BIPOC, women, transgender, nonbinary, queer, disabled, Muslim, and immigrant communities. This is cultural theft, and the impact has been devastating.

But as we have seen with the “Love Is Love” strategy, narrative systems practice is now being reclaimed by people actively engaged in the hard and delicate work of creating a just and pluralist society, and the Pop Culture Collaborative is among those experimenting with these methodologies.

Since its launch in 2017, the Pop Culture Collaborative has dispersed more than $20 million in grants and other program support to more than 200 grantees, senior fellows, cultural strategists, and narrative researchers with the goal of contributing to the growth of a field capable of achieving narrative change goals at scale. In 2020, the Collaborative launched the Becoming America Fund, a multimillion philanthropic strategy that supports a narrative network of pop culture for social change practitioners to use narrative systems methodology to ignite imagination, curiosity, and yearning for something new in the U.S.: a pluralist society where everyone belongs. The fund is our first large-scale exploration of how philanthropic support of narrative system design and network organizing can help the field to achieve this scale and depth of cultural change.

The path forward is clear: to create the world we seek, we must transform narrative oceans. Because if just systems and structures are the bones of a healthy democracy, pluralist culture is its heartbeat, breath, blood, and muscles. One cannot thrive without the other, and now, we have evidence-based methodology that integrates policy and organizing
strategies with equally powerful narrative and cultural strategies that philanthropy needs to resource.

We are honored to continue this work in community with a growing ecosystem of practitioners and funders\textsuperscript{20}, and look forward to evolving our thinking and these ideas with all of you.

\textbf{Bridgit Antoinette Evans} is an artist, culture change strategist, and philanthropic leader with more than 20 years experience designing and testing long-term culture change strategies and narrative systems within social justice movements. She has served as Executive Director and CEO of the Pop Culture Collaborative since its launch in 2017.

\textsuperscript{20} See Appendix.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Below are some questions that may help you dig deeper into this tool and visual framework.

FOR GRANTMAKERS

● Funding pop culture narrative change work involves simultaneously supporting efforts to achieve narrative immersion (coordinated content) and the narrative infrastructure (research, pipelines, networks, convenings, core capacity) needed to achieve this immersion. What portion of your grantmaking will you allocate to each of these areas?

● How will you bring your grantees, coworkers, leadership, and board into your exploration of a narrative systems approach? How might your grantmaking strategy evolve based on the outcomes of a narrative system design process involving these stakeholders?

● How will you bring together your grantees and other stakeholders (other funders, staff, board members) to collaboratively develop a shared culture change goal and conduct a mental model analysis process?

FOR FIELD PRACTITIONERS

● Are you already using a narrative systems design and activation process in your cultural strategy work? If so, what new collaborators, infrastructure, networks, and capacity do you need to activate this work at scale?

● What intrigues you about this particular narrative system framework? What confuses you? How will you adapt it to better fit your needs?

● For content creators, what would you still need to know in order to translate components of a narrative system into creative fuel for your artistic process?

● What would it take for you to be able to collaborate in a cross-sector narrative network to activate a narrative system at mass audience scale? What relationships, capacity, and groundwork would be required?

● How does this exploration of narrative systems theory align with or differ from your narrative change practice?
Key Terms and Definitions

Theory of Narrative Systems: Specific pop culture stories—shaped by narrative archetypes that carry new mental models into the cultural waters—gradually spark an inciting experience or series of experiences that inspire people to experiment with new behaviors. These behaviors, when routinely embodied by a person, gradually diffuse harmful mental models, creating space for these new mental models to live and thrive in the imagination. These new mental models and behaviors, once expressed by millions of people, create the momentum needed to achieve a specific culture change goal.

Culture Change Goal: The simple and strategic expression of the narrative network’s vision for the new way of life, of being, that a transformative narrative ocean is intended to normalize.

Narrative System: The coordinated system of desired behaviors, new mental models, narrative archetypes, and specific story experiences that together will work to shift how people think, feel, and behave in the world.

Narrative Network: The coordinated community of artists, organizers, journalists, public figures, community leaders, and others who work together to activate a narrative system and move story experiences that carry new mental models and behaviors—into the cultural waters.

Narrative Archetype: A story people already know; a story template that most people recognize and to which most people have a reliable response.\(^{21}\)

Mental Model: A foundational idea about the world and how it works that drives behavior and either enables consent or sparks rejection of certain conditions or propositions.\(^{22}\)

Inciting Experience: A profound experience of transformation in which a person changes in ways that lead them to behave differently than before, often making choices and taking actions in a manner in keeping with the new mental models that have replaced harmful ones.\(^{23}\)

Desired Behaviors: A set of normalized behaviors that effects meaningful social change when scaled across society among individuals and groups.\(^{24}\)

Specific Stories: A story expressed through an individual piece (or series) of content, rooted in a narrative archetype, and carrying a set of mental models. These stories create the sensation of narrative immersion in new narrative oceans. Types of stories explored in From Stories to Systems include pop culture experiences, spectacles, revelations of belonging, “big sky” moments, and portal moments.

\(^{21}\) Senser, Ryan, Narrative System Framework, Pop Culture Collaborative and It’s Not Safe Out Here, 2019.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
Community of Practice

*From Stories to Systems* documents the process the Collaborative launched in 2017 with our community of over 300 grantees, senior fellows, staff, and Managing Partners to deepen our collective understanding of narrative systems theory and frameworks.25

As noted earlier, this is the first of several papers and learning tools that Pop Culture Collaborative staff and community will publish to document our understanding of narrative system frameworks, theory, and methodology. *From Stories to Systems* explores one layer of narrative system design and activation—specifically, the process whereby professional entertainment and cultural sector artists, creatives, and storytellers work alongside cultural strategists, researchers, and movement organizers to produce and distribute content in alignment with a narrative system. In future learning tools, we will share frameworks that examine other layers of the narrative system activation process, including how digital-first creators inform and impact narrative oceans, from creating and disseminating their own content, to organizing fandoms and other communities that drive cultural conversations; and how professional and nonprofessional storytellers and digital-first creators work symbiotically and equitably with grassroots communities to conduct participatory research and narrative design, produce content, and activate narrative systems.

We are deeply grateful to the field and funder partners who participated in the Pop Culture Collaborative’s narrative systems learning journey.

**LEARNING PARTNERS**

**POP CULTURE COLLABORATIVE STAFF**
Bridgit Antoinette Evans, Tracy Van Slyke, Marisol Ramos, Katrina Olson, Daria Segalini, Fabiola Feliciano-Batista, Rupa Balasubramanian, Jessica Sykes, Nicholai Joaquin, Nayantara Sen

**SENIOR FELLOW FOR NARRATIVE SYSTEMS**
Ryan Senser with research partner Eleanor Morison (narrative systems framework developers)

**NARRATIVE SYSTEM DESIGN RETREAT | NEW YORK CITY - MARCH 2018**
Alex Beech, Betsy Richards, Eric Ward, Janaya Khan, Jason Rzepka, Mauricio Mota, Maytha Alhassen, Nayantara Sen, Saket Soni, Shawn Taylor, Tracy Sturdivant

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25 The Pop Culture Collaborative’s investigation of narrative systems design, testing, and activation builds upon early experimentation with narrative systems theory and methodology conducted by Bridgit Antoinette Evans in partnership with Ai-jen Poo, Ryan Senser, and the Caring Across Generations team from 2012-2014.
ENTERTAIN CHANGE | LOS ANGELES – JUNE 2018

NARRATIVE SYSTEM WORKING GROUP | NEW YORK CITY – NOVEMBER 2018
Ishita Srivastava, Kristina Apgar, Luis Castro, Michael Ahn, Nikki Marron, Zaheer Ali

NARRATIVE SYSTEM WORKING GROUP | LOS ANGELES – DECEMBER 2018
Jeff Yang, Lawrence Carter-Long, Maha Chehlaoui, Margari Hill, Maytha Alhassen, Mahyad Tousi, Sameer Gardezi, Elizabeth Voorhees

NARRATIVE SYSTEM VIRTUAL TOWNHALL | VIA ZOOM – DECEMBER 2018

FANDOM + IMMERSIVE STORYWORLD GENIUS BANK | OAKLAND - DECEMBER 2018
Aisha Shillingford, Alice Wong, Calvin Williams, Catrina Dennis, Cayden Mak, Eitan Manhoff, Elana Levin, Jeff Yang, Keith Chow, Ivan Askwith, Mikhail Tara Garver, Shawn Taylor, Terry Marshall, Thaddeus Howze

ARTISTS ADVANCING CULTURAL CHANGE RETREAT | NEW YORK CITY – APRIL 2019
Alex Beech, Britt Julious, Camila Concepcion, Catherine Coray, Chike Okonkwo, Deja Harrell, Emily Welsch, Irene Lazaridis, Julio Salgado, Karan Sunil, Katherine Heaney, Lameecee Issaq, Maha Chehlaoui, Megan Patterson, Mike Mosallam, Mikhail Tara Garver, Reshmi Hazra Rustebakke, Stephanie Jeter, Vincent Martell, Yennie Lee
Concurrent with, and in some cases, building upon the Collaborative’s work, a range of colleagues have undertaken work to explore the potential and power of narrative systems methodology. The Collaborative now works in an ecosystem that includes these and other practitioners:

NARRATIVE SYSTEM DESIGN & TESTING

- **Pop Culture Collaborative** focuses on developing theory, narrative system framework (“From Stories to Systems”), definitions, research, and the conditions for large-scale tests of what it takes to design a narrative system (“Towards a Pluralist Future”), organize a narrative network, and activate a narrative system to cultivate pluralist identity.

- **Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy** focuses on developing theory, narrative system framework, definitions, research, and the conditions for a movement-wide test of what it takes to design a narrative system, organize a narrative ecosystem, and activate a narrative system around immigrants and migration.

- **Liz Manne Strategies** focuses on developing theory, narrative system frameworks (“Story Platforms”), definitions, research, and supporting organizations or narrative ecosystems to test what it takes to design and activate a narrative system (“Story at Scale”).

- **It’s Not Safe Out Here** focuses on developing theory, narrative system frameworks, definitions, research, mental model articulation, and supporting organizations or narrative ecosystems to test what it takes to design a narrative system.

NARRATIVE ECOSYSTEM BUILDING

- **Culture Surge** organizes and resources a network of cultural strategists and artists to advance a shared story platform.

- **Center for Cultural Power** organizes and resources networks of artists and cultural organizers to create content in alignment with a shared story strategy.

NARRATIVE SYSTEM ACTIVATION

- **NDWA and Caring Across Generation** are building out their narrative infrastructure and narrative ecosystem in the entertainment and media industries to normalize care as a collective problem requiring collective solutions (e.g., care as infrastructure).
• **Color of Change** is building out their narrative infrastructure and narrative ecosystem in the entertainment and media industries to transform the cultural and political power of Black people into the power to govern.

• **IllumiNative** is building out their narrative infrastructure and narrative ecosystem in the entertainment and media industries to recenter Indigenous cultural and political power in a society that has systematically erased Native cultures, history, and worldviews.

**NARRATIVE SYSTEMS GRANTMAKING**

• The **Managing Partners** of the Pop Culture Collaborative are a diverse and growing network of social justice grantmakers committed to the exploration of how philanthropy can resource narrative networks or ecosystems to design, test, and activate narrative systems. Each does so by funding different aspects of the process, from narrative infrastructure to coordinated networks of grantees to work together to build narrative power.

• The **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**’s Mobility from Poverty initiative supported a network of content creators to develop and test multimedia content created in response to insights from a shared set of narrative research and strategic frameworks.

• **Ford Foundation**’s Rise-Home Stories project supported a network of content creators to develop and test multimedia content designed to help people reimagine our relationship to land and home.

• The **Women’s Foundation of California**’s Culture Change Fund supported the development of the “Story at Scale” research project and story platform, which now guides the strategic thinking of an ecosystem of organizers, strategists, and artists.

This list is not complete, and is offered as a snapshot of the growing community of narrative systems theorists, practitioners, and funders.