

YOUR ECONOMIC  
STATUS IS A CHOICE™

that your economic status is a choice,  
that you don't work hard enough if you're poor.



**DROKE**  
**DROINE**

**Shanelle Matthews**  
RadComms Founder



**Heena Shah**  
Research Team



**Tomme Faust**  
Research Team



**Trina Stout**  
Strategic Communications





**Annie Neimand, PhD**  
Director of Research



**Rakeem Robinson**  
Research Fellow



**Ann Searight Christiano**  
Director



**Jack Barry, PhD**  
Post-doctoral associate



**Matt Sheehan**  
Managing Director



**Lissette Tolentino**  
Research Fellow



**Zakyree Wallace**  
Research Fellow





**Michael Huang**  
Managing Director / Creative Strategy



**Brenda Luu**  
Creative Producer / Project Manager



**Nikita Rusin**  
Creative Director



**Jake Wong**  
Social Media Strategist



**Ebrima Jassej**  
Motion Designer



**Holly Phan**  
Visual Designer



**Pari Gabriel**  
Web Designer

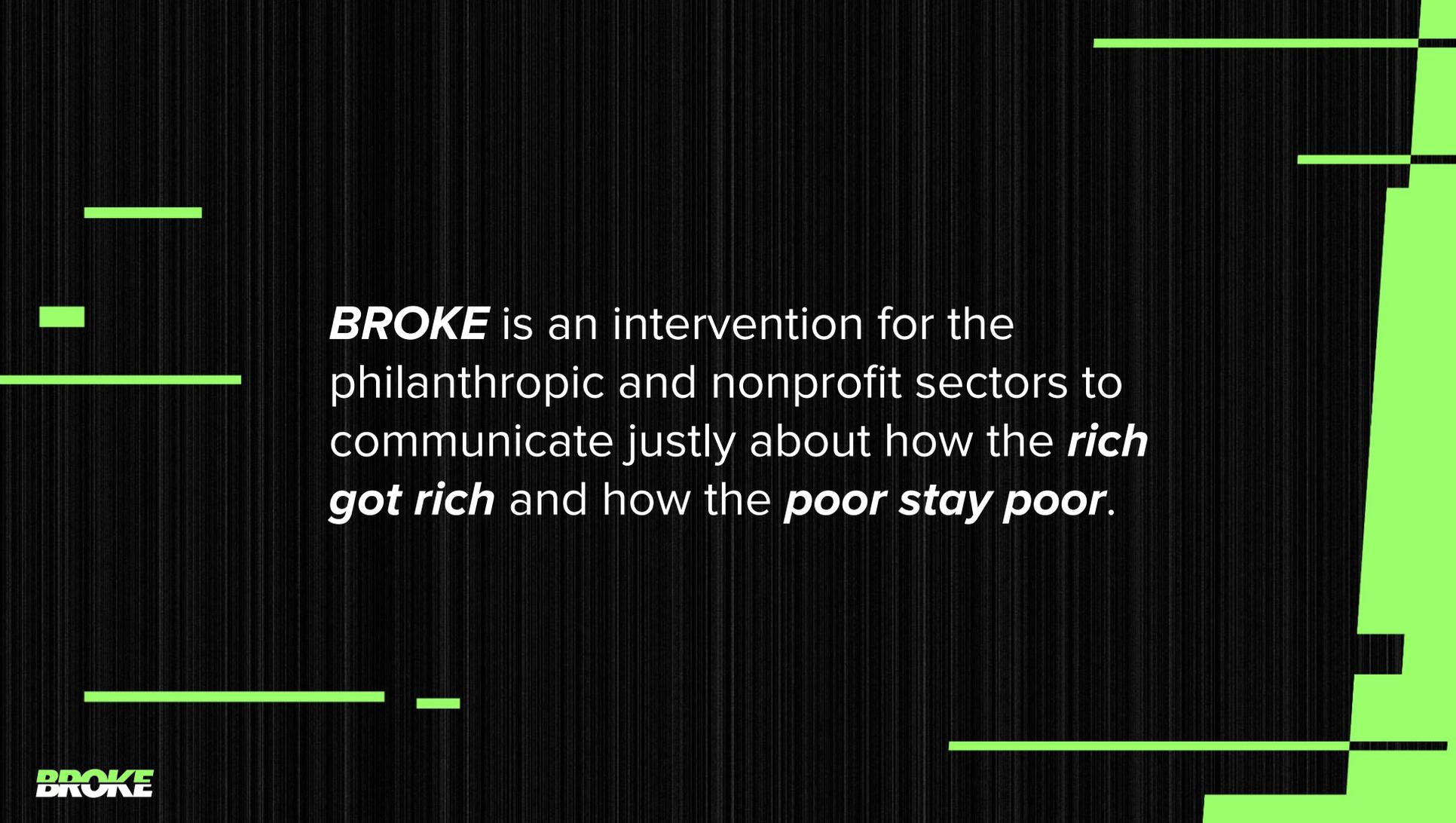


**Ryan Hills**  
Video + Post Production



## IN THE CHAT

*What is a trope you've learned about poverty or wealth? Where did you hear that message?*

The background is black with several horizontal lime green lines of varying lengths scattered across it. On the right side, there is a large, irregular lime green shape that resembles a stylized arrow or a jagged edge pointing towards the center.

***BROKE*** is an intervention for the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors to communicate justly about how the ***rich got rich*** and how the ***poor stay poor***.

# WHAT WE'LL COVER

What we learned  
collaborating across  
organizations

What we learned  
studying how  
organizations are  
telling stories

How to tell stories about  
economic inequality and  
solutions for systems  
change

How we approached  
design with intention

1

2

3

4

# WHAT WE LEARNED FROM COLLABORATING

**PUSHING THE BOUNDS OF  
PHILANTHROPY**

**+**

**WORKING ACROSS  
ORGANIZATIONS &  
ORGANIZATIONAL NORMS**

# CROSS-DISCIPLINE COLLABORATION

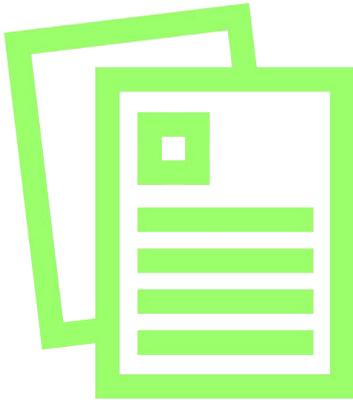


## ADD TO THE CHAT

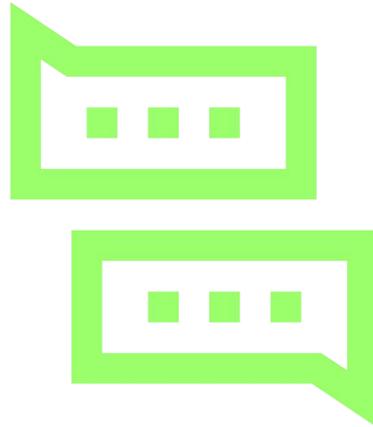
*What are some things you would like to do, but feel restricted by the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors?*

**2. WHAT WE LEARNED  
STUDYING HOW  
ORGANIZATIONS ARE  
TELLING STORIES**

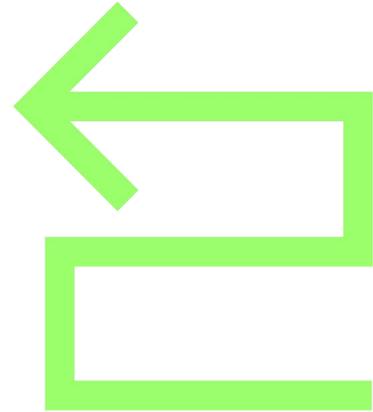
# WHAT WE DID



**Literature  
Review**



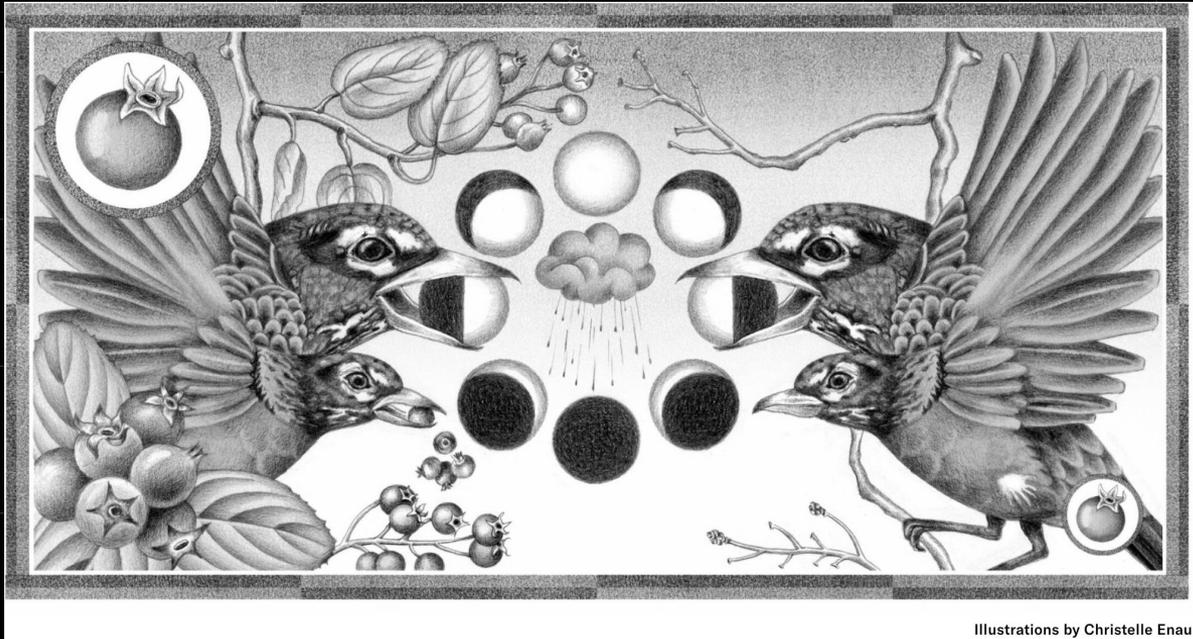
**Content  
Analysis**



**Interviews**

# LOOKING BACK AT NARRATIVES OF POVERTY AND WEALTH

# NARRATIVE HISTORY



*Pre-colonization/pre-capitalism:*

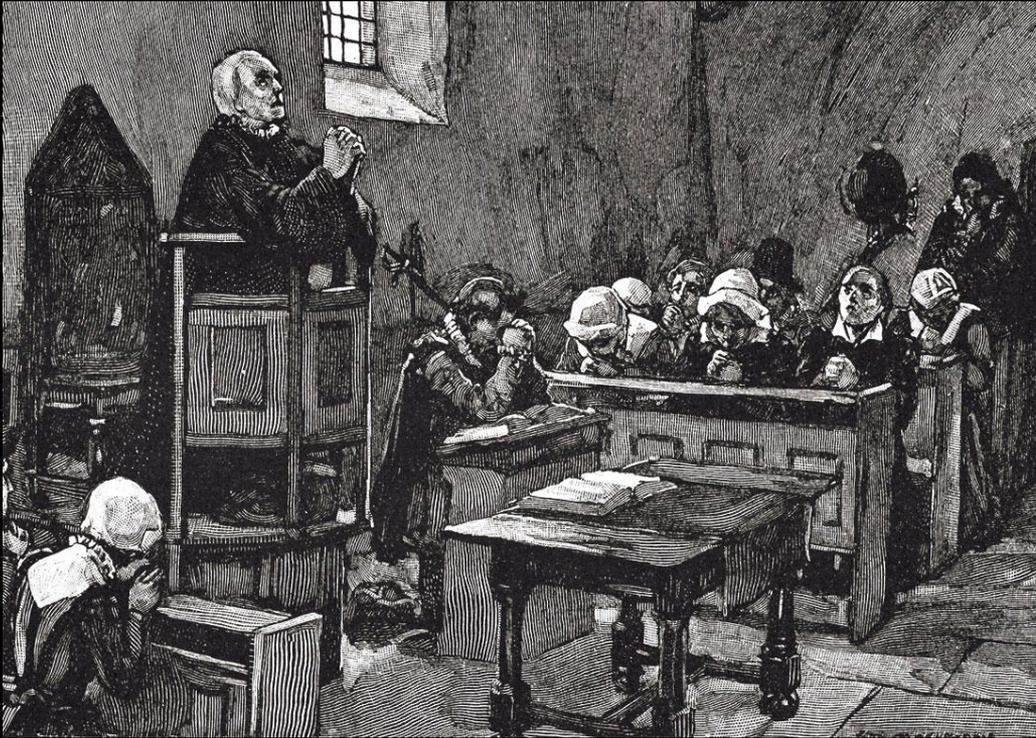
*Reciprocity*

*Interdependence*

*Care*

*Gift economies.*

# NARRATIVE HISTORY



**1600s:**  
*Predestination*  
The “undeserving poor”

*Protestant Work Ethic*  
Work and wealth as morally good

# NARRATIVE HISTORY



**1800s:**

***Individualism***

***(aka Bootstraps/Meritocracy myth)***

**Blames individuals for their failures,  
credits them for their successes.**

**ADD TO THE CHAT**

*What are some narratives around poverty/wealth that you see nonprofits and philanthropy using?*

# LITERATURE REVIEW

# 5 CASE STUDIES

## THE CASE STUDIES

PAPER	ORGANIZATION(S)	CITATION
"Portrayals of the poor on the cusp of capitalism: Promotional materials in the case of Heifer International"	Heifer International	Clair, R. P., & Anderson, L. B. (2013). "Portrayals of the poor on the cusp of capitalism: Promotional materials in the case of Heifer International." <i>Management Communication Quarterly</i> , 27(4), 537-567.
"NGOs, communicative labor, and the work of grassroots representation:	Grassroots International, a pseudonym for an environmental justice NGO (anonymous in the paper)	Dempsey, S. E. (2009). "NGOs, communicative labor, and the work of grassroots representation." <i>Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies</i> , 6(4), 328-345.
"Poverty and the controversial work of nonprofits" and "Connecting poverty, culture, and cognition: The bridges out of poverty process"	Bridges Out of Poverty, a nonprofit organization	Jindra, M., & Jindra, I. W. (2016). "Poverty and the controversial work of nonprofits." <i>Society</i> , 53(6), 634-640. Jindra, I. W., and Jindra, M. (2018). "Connecting poverty, culture, and cognition: The bridges out of poverty process." <i>Journal of Poverty</i> , 22(1), 42-64.
"Change the Narrative: Poverty Discourse and Frontline Work in Community-based Organizations in Post-Welfare Los Angeles"	Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) and Strength-Based Community Change (SBCC).	Wells, R. B. (2021). <i>Change the Narrative: Poverty Discourse and Frontline Work in Community-based Organizations in Post-Welfare Los Angeles</i> (Doctoral dissertation, UCLA).
"You start with the youth": Narratives of deservingness and dissent at a homeless service organization"	West Coast Youth, a pseudonym for an organization serving homeless youth	Yarbrough, D. (2021). "'You start with the youth': Narratives of deservingness and dissent at a homeless service organization." <i>Sociological Perspectives</i> , 07311214211019431.

Organizations share stories of individuals who were able to become contributing members of a capitalist society by joining the middle class or starting businesses.

Organizations share partial stories about poor people, only sharing aspects of their lives related to being poor or getting out of poverty.

Stories about people in other countries oversimplify [AC or glorify] poverty by featuring people in pastoral settings.

People who live in poverty are often absent from the stories told about them.

The stories told promote individual-level change over system-level change, even when the organization acknowledges systemic changes are needed.

Organizations do not share many stories about wealth.

# CONTENT ANALYSIS

**10 ORGANIZATIONS +  
27 PIECES OF CONTENT**

## A RUBRIC FOR TELLING STORIES THAT TRANSFORM PERSPECTIVES ON POVERTY

Stories are the most powerful tool we have as changemakers. They can shift perspectives by helping people understand what economic injustice feels like and how it came to be. They can also inspire people to act.

Use this rubric to determine whether your story is likely to be effective in shifting mindsets around the issues you're working on, without reinforcing harmful pervasive narratives.

### Are you using the narrative arc?

**Which plot structures does your story use? Check all that apply. (If it's one that's used all the time, consider shifting to one less often used. In our research for this project, we saw that many organizations are using the *overcoming the monster* plot structure more than any other.)**

- Overcoming the monster*, in which a group of people work together to defeat a common threat to self or country
- Rags to riches*, in which a character has nothing, gains everything, loses it, and then gains it for good, often after the demise or misfortune of their adversaries
- Comedy, in which a series of ridiculous or funny events result in a happy ending
- Tragedy, in which an otherwise likable character has a deep moral flaw that results in their demise or that of others
- The quest, in which a character or group of characters seeks an answer, event, or object
- Voyage and return, in which the central character travels to a new place and returns transformed
- Rebirth, in which a character either gains a new perspective or helps others do so, which results in a shared new and improved reality

### What do you want people who hear this story to do (i.e., take a specific action)?

Given what you want them to do, **what do you want people who hear this story to feel?** Focus on positive emotions like pride, hope, love, awe, and parental love, which are associated with agency and action.

**Are systems of inequality and how they operate to oppress poor people central to the story (for more on this, review the [systems worksheet](#))? These could include:**

- Structural barriers to choice and access
- Explicit acknowledgment of white supremacy, racism, capitalism, classism, or patriarchy
- A systemic, not individual, root of the challenge facing central characters

**Is the conflict between the central character and another character, or between the character and a system?**

**Which aspects of the system are you highlighting in your story with character and setting choices to illustrate the root cause of conflict?**

- Historical
- Political
- Geographical
- Social
- Economic

**Are racism, classism, sexism, and ableism made explicit and central to the story? How are these visible in the story?**

**Are you featuring the experiences of poor people authentically? Have you included specific cultural details and experiences (e.g., cultural authenticity vs. generalizations and simplifications)?**

**Whose point of view is the story written from? (Most often, this should be the perspective of the individuals who are most affected.) How does that point of view bring audiences into the story?**

**If the story is not being told by those most affected, are you featuring the experiences of poor people authentically? Have you included specific cultural details and experiences (e.g., cultural authenticity vs. generalizations and simplifications)?**

**Who is the hero in the story? Is it your organization? How can you make affected communities or allies the hero?**

**How does the affected community express its agency? What does their power look like?**

Is the villain or source of the problem a system rather than a single individual?

Does this story uphold any common harmful tropes or narratives? Check all that apply

- American Dream
- Deservingness
- Personal responsibility as a source of problem and solution
- Bootstraps worldview
- White savior
- Welfare queen
- Participation in capitalism as an ideal outcome
- Other

Did this story challenge any of these? If yes, how so?

- Y/N
- How:

Do the underlying values in the story or moral of the story focus on:

- Reparations
- Justice
- Fairness
- Reducing harm to poor people
- Interdependence
- Reciprocity
- Community care
- Solidarity
- Mutual aid
- Other

Survey inspired by:

Pérez Huber, L., Camargo Gonzalez, L., & Solórzano, D. G. (2020). "Theorizing a Critical Race Content Analysis for Children's Literature about People of Color." Urban Education, 0042085920963713.

**75%**

of the organizations were not telling stories with a beginning, middle and end, conflict and resolution; characters and setting.

**41%**

of the stories framed poor people as being in need of saving.

**31%**

Of stories included reference to systems of oppression. However, more than half did not reference race and racism.

**40%**

Of stories represented poor people as a homogenous group of people.

**70 %**

of the stories featured organizations with power. Less than half of the stories included characters as having power.

**Based on analysis of 27 pieces of content from 10 organizations**

**ADD TO THE CHAT**

*What are your reflections on these findings?*

**3. HOW TO TELL STORIES  
ABOUT ECONOMIC  
INEQUALITY AND SOLUTIONS  
FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE**

# BRIGHT SPOTS



*Coalition of Immokalee Farm Workers*

*Southerners on New Ground*

*Migrant Justice*

*Invisible People*

*Action Center on Race and the Economy*

*Economic Security Project*



# HOW TO TELL STORIES FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

1. Tell stories about individuals navigating systems and engaging in collective action to disrupt power
2. Create space for people to come together and talk about systems
3. Problematize current narratives
4. Use justice frames in storytelling
5. Build the capacity of communities to share stories
6. Use visual images and language to engage communities
7. Be intentional with the language you use
8. Amplify stories—ethically

A black and white photograph of a person at a protest, holding up a banner that reads 'FIGHT FOR \$15'. The person is wearing a cap and a watch. The background shows trees and a building. The image is partially obscured by a large green graphic on the right side of the slide.

# HOW TO TELL STORIES FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

1. Tell stories about individuals navigating systems and engaging in collective action to disrupt power
4. Use justice frames in storytelling
5. Build the capacity of communities to share stories
8. Amplify stories—ethically

# TELL STORIES ABOUT SYSTEMS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

**SONG**  
SOUTHERNERS ON NEW GROUND



**WE ORGANIZE**  
*We Build Power, We Win*

**BROKE  
BROKE**

**YOUR TURN**

**HOW CAN YOU TELL STORIES THAT  
FEATURE SYSTEMS AS SETTINGS  
AND CHARACTERS ENGAGING IN  
COLLECTIVE ACTION?**

# USE JUSTICE FRAMES IN STORYTELLING



WENDY'S  
EXPLOITS  
FARM  
WORKERS

WENDY'S  
EXPLOITS  
FARM  
WORKERS

EMPLOYERS OBLIGE  
VOI

WHOSE  
HANDS  
PICKED YOUR  
FOOD?

FARM  
WORKER  
RIGHTS  
ARE A  
BIGGIE

NO  
PARKING  
TOW-AWAY

**YOUR TURN**

**HOW CAN YOU FRAME THE  
PROBLEM AND SOLUTION AS  
IN/JUSTICE?**

**BUILD THE CAPACITY OF  
COMMUNITIES TO SHARE THEIR  
STORIES**

FEDERAL  
UNITED STATES  
UNITED STATES



*Human  
Rights*

JUSTICIA MIGRANTE



MIGRANT JUSTICE

*Derechos  
Humanos*

**THINK ABOUT THIS**

**HOW WILL YOU WORK WITH  
COMMUNITIES TO TELL THEIR OWN  
STORIES?**

**AMPLIFY STORIES—ETHICALLY**



# American Dreaming:

## The Roadmap to Resilience for Undocumented Storytellers



**We will ask:** Is now a good time to share your story? How have you been since we last connected?

- We will offer ways to scale down the work or provide a way of stepping away from the project if necessary.

**We will ask:** What do you feel comfortable sharing now?

- We will use the answer as a guide for healthy boundaries in our collaborations and will not ask for additional details or efforts.

**We will ask:** Have you shared your/this story before?

- We will facilitate training and give guidance to lay a foundation for good health and well-being in the storytelling community.

**We will offer** a scope of work, compensation, and a timeline for involvement, and ask if it feels in line with your expectations.

**We will design** ways of seeking feedback and suggestions for nurturing storytellers' mental health and well-being within our work.

**We will hold** others we work with, particularly in the media, accountable for honoring your contributions.

- For pronouncing and spelling your names correctly
- For honoring your gender identity and pronouns
- For being forthcoming and transparent about when conversations are “on the record” or “off the record”
- For including you in the decision-making process around your stories
- When possible, sending you a draft of the story write-up before it publishes or being open to edits after a story has published if you, as the storyteller, feel uneasy about story details
- For following up with a link to a written/recorded story once it is published
- For simply thanking a storyteller for their time and vulnerability when sharing their story

**YOUR TURN**

**HOW WILL YOU TAKE CARE OF THE  
STORYTELLERS?**

## "The cows don't milk themselves"



# 4. HOW WE APPROACHED DESIGN WITH INTENTION

**“THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST IS TO MAKE THE  
REVOLUTION IRRESISTIBLE.”**

**- Toni Cade Bambara**

## Dignity and Power:

Telling truth and seeking justice in a broken economic system.

# Empowering and transformative storyteller.

MOTTO



**PROVOKE** ○ **ILLUMINATE**

**INSPIRE** ○ **ENGAGE**

# REWRITE

**Listener** ○ **Storyteller**

Forward **Thinker** ○ Truth **Speaker**

**Teacher** ○ **Strategist**

**Relentless** ○ **Unrelenting**

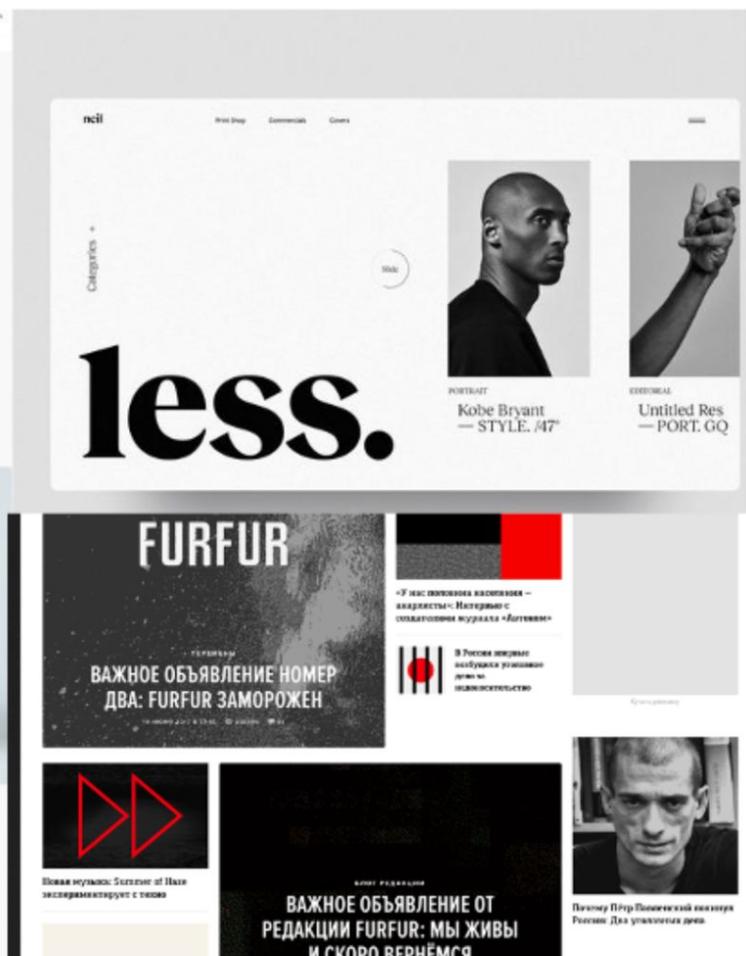
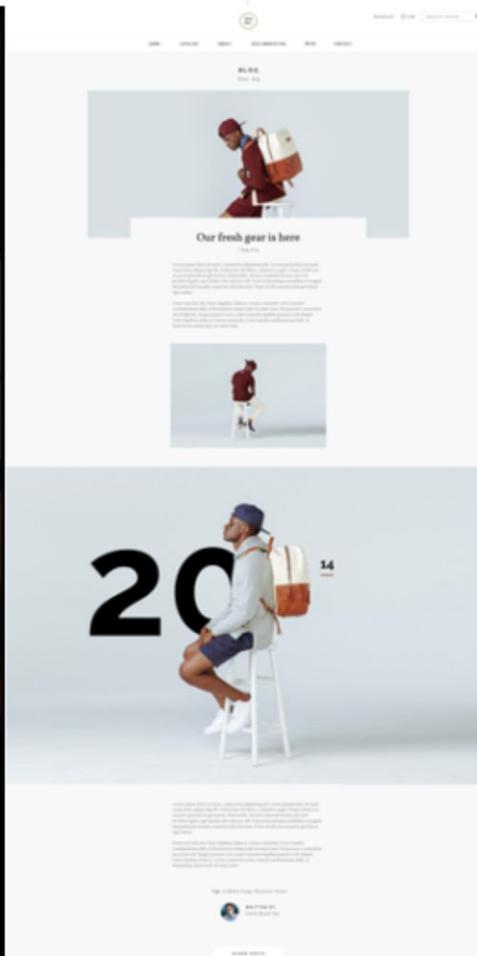
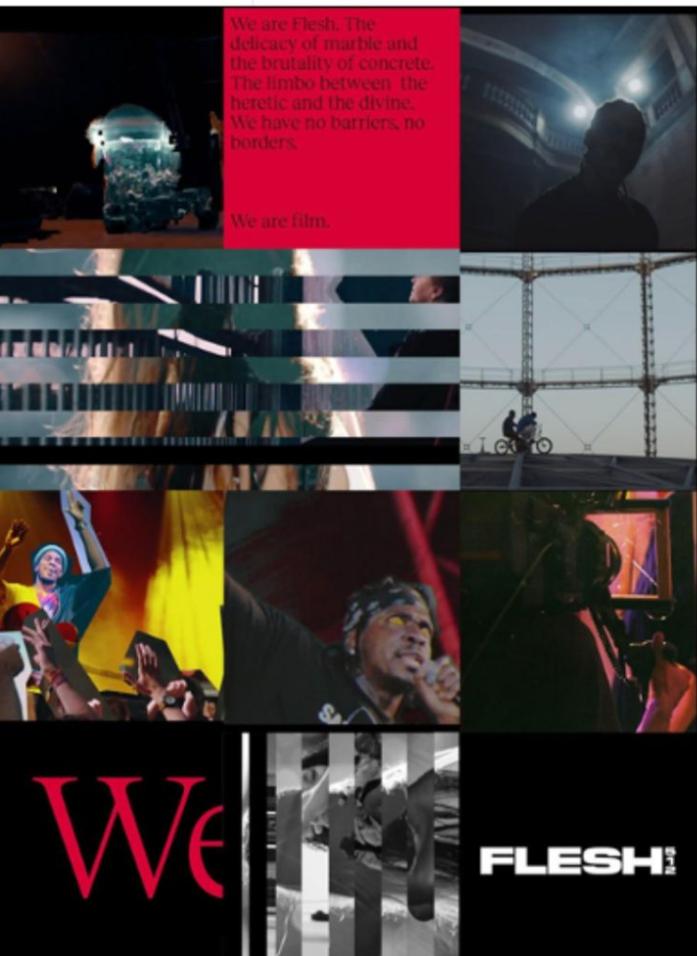
**Powerful** ○ **Empowering**

**Intersectional** ○ **Open**

CHARACTERISTICS



# VISUAL TREATMENT



1	2	3	4
<b>BROKE</b>	<b>BROKE</b>	<b>_broke.</b>	<b>broke_</b>
5	6	7	8
<b>BROKE</b>	<b>BROKE</b>	<b>BROKE</b>	



## HOW THE NONPROFIT AND PHILANTHROPIC SECTORS ARE TALKING ABOUT POVERTY— AND HOW WE CAN DO BETTER

Despite considerable grassroots energy and a body of tools and resources on progressive economic justice communications and organizing, our research shows that organizations in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors are reinforcing repressive, victim-blaming narratives that shift fault and responsibility for poverty from greedy corporations and unfair laws to ordinary people. There are stories that designate some poor people as more deserving than others, and that use exploitative images and descriptions of poor people of color to engender pity but falls short of justice and meaningful action.

In the 21st century, in the eye of the fourth industrial revolution, our mandate is to communicate about class, socioeconomic status (the combination of class, status, and power), labor, deservingness (a kind of worth that is directly tied to social definitions of who has value and who does not), wealth, and quality of life in ways that do not continue to advantage one group or one type of work over another. In addition, we reject false solutions that protect corporate interests and throw away good, socially democratic public programs that would otherwise benefit millions of people.

In this report, we share insights from our research to identify harmful narratives perpetuated by well-meaning organizations in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors primarily in the United States. We also celebrate organizations telling transformative stories of poor people navigating and changing broken systems, challenging problematic narratives, organizing collective action to drive change, and creating economic alternatives. We focused our attention on these sectors to explore how we are telling stories about poverty and wealth, where we are doing it well, and where we can do better.

**AMPLIFICATION**  
Word of Mouth, paid media,  
earned media

**WEB**  
Interactive web experience

**ENGAGEMENT  
ECOSYSTEM**

**RESOURCES**  
Well designed, robust reports  
and worksheets

**CONTENT**  
High quality, beautiful content

## **3 TIPS FOR INCORPORATING INTENTIONAL DESIGN:**

- 1. Involve your design team / designer from the beginning**
- 2. Map your audience's journey / engagement ecosystem**
- 3. Leverage technology for flexible templates (e.g. Google Slides, Canva)**

**QUESTIONS + OBSERVATION**

**THANK  
YOU**

[brokeproject.org](http://brokeproject.org)

**BROKE  
BROKE**



**WORKSHEETS  
NOW AVAILABLE**

**[brokeproject.org](http://brokeproject.org)**

“

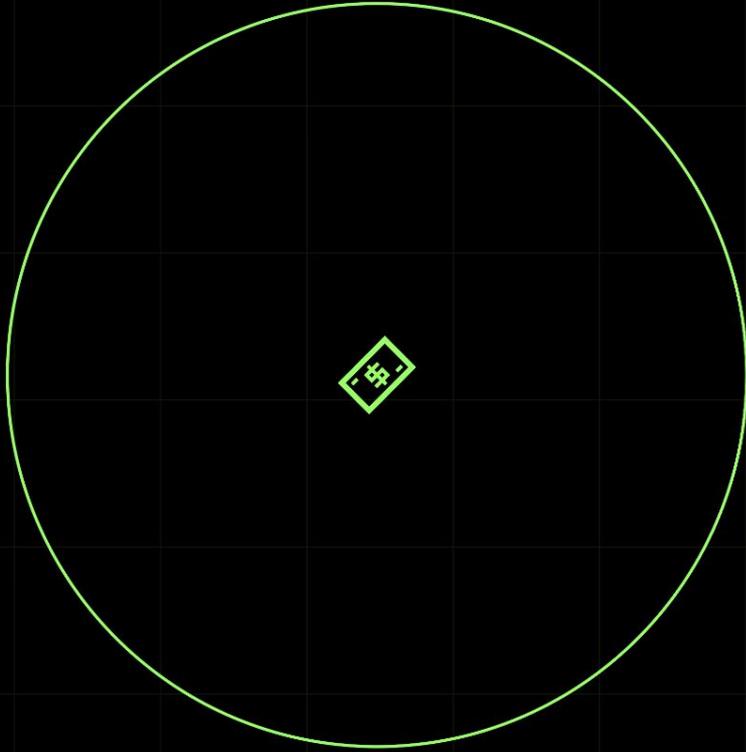
***Caste is insidious and therefore powerful because it is not hatred, it is not necessarily personal. It is the worn grooves of comforting routines and unthinking expectations, patterns of a social order that have been in place for so long that it looks like the natural order of things.***

ISABEL WILKERSON, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*

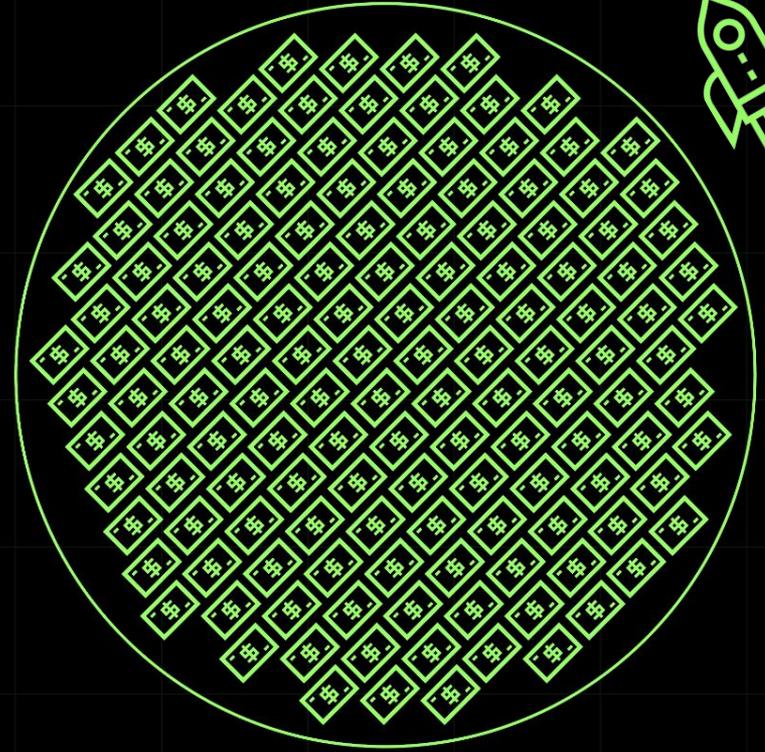
”



***Media is the primary mechanism through which ideology is shared and learned.***



Working people got \$600 unemployment checks (many governors cut those off early to starve people who would not “go back to work.”)



Billionaires' wealth increased by \$3.9B between March 18 and December 30, 2020.

# PROBLEM

Anti-poverty organizations in the impact sector share a narrative that frames ending poverty as successfully integrating poor people into the existing capitalist system.

Success is defined by a person or community's ability to successfully “work” their way out of poverty.

Organizations share stories of individuals who were able to become contributing members of a capitalist society by joining the middle class or starting businesses.

Organizations share partial stories about poor people, only sharing aspects of their lives related to being poor or getting out of poverty.

Stories about people in other countries oversimplify [AC or glorify] poverty by featuring people in pastoral settings.

People who live in poverty are often absent from the stories told about them.

The stories told promote individual-level change over system-level change, even when the organization acknowledges systemic changes are needed.

Organizations do not share stories about wealth.

# THEORY OF CHANGE

If we call on activists, nonprofits, charities, donors and funders to tell just, accurate stories about poverty and wealth, we can weaken the harmful narratives that hold in place our current economic, social, and political systems, in order to end poverty and create a world where everyone's needs are met, and where new stories are grounded in truth, liberation, and empathy.



The story we're told about **WHY** people can't "**move up**" in class status is characterized in a way that blames and shames the poor for being poor – because by placing the blame on individual poor people, the network of oppressive economic infrastructure that keeps the rich rich remains safe.

“

*Out of deep conditions of domination and exclusion, people create their own insights, understandings, knowledge, and narratives.*

”



