

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE LEADERS PROJECT

AUGUST 2022

BRIDGE PROJECT, PHASES # & 2 — FINDINGS REPORT

NOTE TO READERS

Imagine a future in which the prevalent story of American identity being untethered from white supremacy. An identity that would be neither white supremacist nor centered around resisting white supremacy. Without forgetting the lessons of our past, this American identity would create space for a fundamental reconstitution of the story of America to align with the world we aim to build over the decades to come.

That is the animating impulse behind the Bridge Project, a collaborative narrative research project of the Social & Economic Justice Leaders Project focused on developing a future story of American identity, of belonging in and to this country. The goal here is not to polarize people into action tomorrow, but to entice people to a new shared identity that is so expansive and rooted in belonging that it is irresistable.

This narrative "destination" project takes a different approach from much of the narrative work that aims to win an election, to pass a policy, to make progress in the near term. The Bridge Project attempts to craft a story that aligns with who we are working to be in 30 years, and to strategize for transformation by building backward from that future narrative to inform the stories that shape our work today and in the coming years.

One of the challenges of this approach is that the destination narrative reflects healing that we have not yet done as a nation:

to have arrived at a prevalent American identity that has ample room for plenty of diverse constituent identities;

to have built a notion of American-ness that acknowledges the harms of our white supremacist past, but has also repaired enough for us to broadly share values and trust;

to have created a nation where the sacred humanity of all drives our understanding of who belongs.

Working from that destination to the present clarifies the repair that is needed to enable atomized groups to come together in a shared identity, to release the sense of power that comes from marginalizing others, to begin to heal the legacy of harm from the abuses of that power. It is not only hard to imagine, but it can be painful to realize how distant that destination feels. Hopefully, though, it is also motivating.

We are grateful to the people who have participated in the project so far, through interviews, focus groups, and comments on early drafts. And, we are excited to share the findings of our early work with you, as we move toward testing in live campaign contexts.

With gratitude and enthusiasm,

Connie Razza Angela Peoples

Executive Director Fellow and Project Lead

ABOUT THE SOCIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE LEADERS PROJECT

SEJ is a shared resource, capacity builder, and collaboration space for leaders and organizations across progressive movements to:

- Nurture relationships and align strategies;
- Prepare for opportunities and risks through scenario planning and experiential learning;
- Catalyze new projects that translate plans into actions; and
- Expand the social imaginary on social values and systems for a just future.

REFRAMING THE PREVAILING AMERICAN NARRATIVE FOR 2052

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE LEADERS PROJECT BRIDGE PROJECT, PHASES 1 & 2 — FINDINGS REPORT

AUGUST 2022

TOWARDS AN AMERICAN IDENTITY OUTSIDE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

There is growing awareness across the political spectrum that the current of white supremacy still runs through the United States and, particularly among those who today might be identified as moderates and progressives, a growing commitment that rejecting that white supremacy is necessary for the US to develop a robust, multi-racial democracy. However, as calls grow for individuals, business, and political institutions to opt out of white supremacy, the natural next question is, "Then, what do we belong to?"

The Bridge Project seeks to build a collective narrative of possibility and world-making that reflects who we are together when we divest from and ultimately thrive outside of white supremacy.

In order to divest from white supremacy as the defining characteristic of the American identity, we must shift away from a political and social paradigm that relies on our relationship to whiteness and our ability to generate profit as the main qualifiers of belonging. We need to cultivate a different story about belonging in this country that lifts up the sacred humanity in all. The urgent necessity of this shift is apparent in many of the deep, seemingly intractable challenges facing movement leaders and the communities we are rooted in. Today's prevailing "American" identity was not designed for the trans boy from West Valley City, Utah or the Black single mother in North Carolina-by-way-of-Nigeria. Yet we continue to ask these people and their communities to show up and participate in shaping that old story. If we continue to fight our battles in the existing paradigm within the dominant American identity, we will be fighting to save a version of American identity and ideals that does not include most of us or our futures.

Currently, the dominant "American" identity is steeped in a particular white supremacy culture that includes, not only racialized supremacy, but also patriarchy, Christian supremacy, hyper-productivity and profitability, and individualism. White supremacy culture is the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to people of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. White supremacy culture is reproduced by all the institutions of our society.2 Despite decades of legal, social, and cultural transformation, the shared understanding of what it means to belong in America continues to have whiteness and the experience of white people at its core. Decades of "the first Latino to X," "the first African-American woman to Y," countless civil rights lawsuits, and Primetime TV specials on "Race in America" remind us that transforming American identity is not simply a matter of including more nonwhite people³ in the franchise or incorporating aspects of their cultures like music, dance, or fashion. It requires a fundamental reimagining of who we are and how we know it.

Even movement strategies and messaging to upend white supremacy overwhelmingly exists on the very terrain of white supremacy, centering white people and hoping to move them incrementally toward progressive solutions. Our calls for a "seat at the table" and demands for representation of nonwhite identities and experiences assumes an adherence to the hierarchy of cultural, social, and political identities established by white supremacy. For example, when we declare, "Anyone in this country who works hard for 40 hours a week, should be able to provide for their family," we simultaneously make the case for material conditions that allow workers to survive (and, more ambitiously, to thrive) while also reinforcing the notion that one's ability to generate profit determines how much they deserve to care for their family and to belong in the United States.

¹ In her summer 2017 paper for Bucknell University, Carol White defines the concept of sacred humanity, as emphasizing humans as sacred centers of value and distinct movements of nature itself where deep relationality and interconnectedness become key metaphors for honoring all life forms.

See for instance, https://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html

We use "nonwhite people" here instead of people of color or Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) in recognition that whiteness defines which people are understood to have access to power. The power dynamic referenced here is not between white people and the specific peoples and ethic groups that we commonly called "people of color". It is between white people — as defined by white supremacy culture — and those people whom white supremacy designates as not white. How people who are racialized in or out of whiteness often have little to do with actual skin color.

While this type of messaging may prove useful toward galvanizing voters in the immediate term of election cycles or specific policy fights, it also doubles down on a story of what it means to be an American that has productivity and profitability (two aspects of white supremacy culture), as the central—if offstage—protagonist. At the core of the stories we tell, the messages we craft, even the campaigns we choose, lies the implicit and endemic notion that the experiences, ideas, challenges, values, and solutions of white people are the measure by which all American identities are to be judged and to which all Americans should strive.

This dynamic reinforces the imbalance of political and economic power between white and nonwhite people that was birthed out of European genocide of Native Americans, land theft, and the British innovation of chattel slavery of Africans and their descendants. It leads us to ignore the reality of internalized white supremacy and manifestations of white supremacy culture in Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities, and other communities of color. It also limits the scope of what we believe is possible for access to power and decision-making in this country.

If the prevailing notion of who is American remains dependent on white supremacy and—more to the point—the superior status of white, Christian men, then a multi-racial, multicultural, and multi-religious population can never truly practice shared governance and power.

The Bridge Project is working to develop a story of who we are under a new paradigm, anchored in a sacred regard for humanity and, fundamentally, untethered to white supremacy culture and the governance structures that support it. We seek to articulate a story of where we are heading, who we will be, and how we will be with each other in that future.

WHAT IS THE BRIDGE PROJECT?

The Bridge Project is a collaborative narrative research project to develop a future story of American identity - a way of belonging in and to this country - that is neither white supremacist nor against white supremacy, but which rejects white supremacy as constitutive of American identity and, without becoming ahistorical, creates space to move beyond it. This narrative "destination" project takes a different approach from much of the narrative work in the field by attempting to craft a story that aligns with who we hope to be in 20 - 30 years, to forecast a future narrative and work back from there to inform the stories that we tell about our work today and in the coming years. We seek to define and shape a new American identity that is a bigger, more resilient, and irresistible "we" that all of us can opt into.

The work is premised on the understanding that white supremacy is so fundamental to what it means to be American today that we must transport ourselves to the future to craft a story of who we are and who we can be outside of white supremacy, and work our way back to the present day from there. A cornerstone assumption of this project is that all of us, white people and nonwhite people, carry internalized white supremacy and suffer from its consequences. To truly create a story that moves people to divest ourselves and our systems from white supremacy, we must develop a story that moves nonwhite people, as well as white people.

Through a series of one-on-one conversations, small group discussions, and analysis of social movements, identity, and sociological research, the Bridge Project has crafted several narrative frameworks that could scaffold a story for the prevailing American identity in the future. Again, the goal is not to develop a story that speaks to the general public as we understand it today or even to voters who might align with left-leaning politics of the moment; rather, the goal is to craft a narrative for the future that could be used as a destination to inform the strategic milestones we put down with the messages we are crafting to win campaigns today.

Over the next year, we intend to test this framework with a broader public through focus groups and public surveys, in order to establish a baseline of resonance among our target audiences and identify opportunities to invite them into living (adopting, supporting) with the stories, values and practices within it. We will also test this destination framework with organizations running campaigns, to invest communities in a vision of the future that aligns its values, narratives, and aspirations. We encourage you to engage it actively—and share what you're learning back with us via email at

BridgeProject@sejleaders.org.

KEY HYPOTHESES

Belonging in the current American identity story relies on detachment from aspects of history and cultural identity that are seen as distinct from or in conflict with

"American"-ness. We found this experience of the current identity to be particularly salient among the US-born white and nonwhite immigrant participants in our focus groups. Among the immigrants we spoke with, we heard a great sense of mourning associated with this kind of forced forgetting. For US-born white folks, there was an awareness that their families' ethnic histories were intentionally erased or left behind by their predecessors in order to survive, assimilate, and, ultimately, thrive.

This finding invites a reframing of the concept of the Great American Melting Pot, which suggests that to become identified as American is to be broken down, change forms, and blended into a new entity, no longer able to access one's old form or ways of being. By stripping away parts of our individual and shared history until all that remains is a homogenized way of belonging, this melting down and detachment strengthens white supremacy and whiteness as the core of American identity.

Non-belonging, being "other," or feeling outcast is fundamental to the current American identity. This story element is reflected in messages and ideology on the right and the left. On one hand, a salient story tells how the colonists were ostracized and ultimately pushed out of Great Britain, driving them to create a new world out of the ashes of tyranny. On the other hand, the story of America is of a country of immigrants, in search of a better life for their families. Whether stated explicitly or implied, the story of the "true American" is one who is not welcome or safe in other systems or structures, but is able to experience freedom and self-determination by clinging to what "unites us," including — at least, in part — that feeling of being rejected or on the outside in other nations. In short, belonging in the US is paradoxically about not belonging elsewhere. It's no coincidence that the struggles, sacrifice and violence perpetuated by or inflicted upon those trying to navigate moving from outside to inside of the American identity is erased from both stories.

Our research finds that this can be a useful hook as we seek to shape a new American identity. In small group conversations, participants talked fondly about the parts of their identity that had been a source of ridicule and shame but had become points of pride and affinity as they found a group or space that was welcoming to those perceived differences. When crafting a narrative framework for who Americans are to be in the future, we have an opportunity to learn from the power of "otherness" in building a collective story in which many people can see themselves without needing to reject core parts of who they are.

Identity is formed and fortified in moments when people have to choose a side. Identities can and do evolve. The moments when one is confronted by hard choices provide opportunities for the salience, mobilization, and politicization of those identities. During small group discussions, participants talked about the moment they found out they were undocumented or experienced a drastic shift in financial stablity as key to defining and redefining their identities. This suggests that moments of polarization, where people have to choose a side, are necessary to establish and impart a new American identity.

The challenges of toxic polarization complicates the positive power of polarization to reshape identity. When the identity-shaping choice becomes "affective polarization" — which experts describe as groups not simply disagreeing but actively disliking and dehumanizing one another — at least one facet of toxic polarization is fulfilled, and logical arguments and rational debate is less successful. ⁴ This thin line between generative and toxic polarization underscores the importance of a shared identity that holds space for a wide range of experiences and expressions, bound by a set of values and responsive to our history, rather than to a limited identity story or hierarchy of experiences.

Identity is an animation and expression of values. As we shape a new narrative, we can define our "we" by our values – how we treat each other, how we steward the land, and how we distribute resources. White supremacy does this effectively through anti-Blackness and settler colonialism. Through consistent humiliation, occupation, domination, and exclusion, white supremacy signals that Blackness and indigeneity are not valued or low status, and that everyone — especially nonwhite people — should avoid, reject, and attempt to become or remain superior to that. The implicit possibility of "losing" whiteness creates a fragile national identity that can easily find itself under threat. Reclaiming the history and ethnic origins we have detached from is a key step in the unlearning and divesting from white supremacy. Our hypothesis is that a story of our shared and diverse histories and of how our current choices shape us will be vital to developing the new, resilient American identity.

⁴Good vs Toxic Polarization

WEAREAWERD, MISFITS, COMING OURSERED ABUNDANT, JOYFUL

NARRATIVE FRAMEWORKS TO TEST

- 1. All identities and experiences belong in the United States. Our values define us. Our practice of those values shapes us. We no longer shortcut American-ness through stereotypes of race, gender, religion, or ethnicity.
 - The strength in our American identity derives from its spaciousness, which has room for the wide range of identities, journeys, and histories that have brought us to the present. We need not lay aside our individual or collective pasts to assimilate to a fictional "sameness."
 - We value a "Come as you are, grow as you go" worldview.
 - We are a weird, wonderful, mix of misfits, coming together to face our shared challenges and make the decisions that create an abundant, joyful environment in which we all can thrive. We value expressions of individual and collective identity that remind us of the cultures and countries of our ancestors and our ability to imagine and reimagine who we are today.
 - We are committed to transforming our relationship with one another, even in the face of harmful actions, as long as all parties are willing and ready to commit to being in community.
 - Efforts to stop us from becoming a truly multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, just and democratic society don't belong and can not be tolerated.
 - We don't reject individuals, identities, experiences, or beliefs. We reject behaviors that attack our multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic, just and pluralistic society, or that promote exploitation, harm, or exclusion.
- 2. Our history is a wellspring that refreshes our practice of our values and what it means to be American.
 - We imprint what is possible for the future of our national experiment by understanding the struggles, hurt, joy, and triumphs of everyday individuals, and the moments when we have come together to grow as a people, rather than assimilating to an aspiration for supremacy.
 - Rather than being an exceptional beacon of democracy, America is and has always been an experiment to become the first country on the face of the earth that could actually be a multi-racial democracy. We learn how to realize our shared vision from our past failures to live up to our shared values, as well as our successes. We have yet to achieve that goal, but it is our grand project of becoming.
 - The best way we move through the pain and shame of parts of our history is to acknowledge them. Past practices of exploitation relied on a climate of shame and isolation, creating false hierarchies of identities, turning our experiences and identities against us, as tools to divide us.

- Belonging in the US means being honest about the truth of our painful pasts and embedding that truth as a core part of our shared identity. It's how we understand what behaviors or ways of being do not belong. It's also how we develop and sharpen how we can practice living the values we want in the future.
- 3. Belonging in the US means the chance for all of us to live an abundant life, not just to dream or strive for one. What unites us is our commitment and practice of values of safety, care, and shared abundance.
 - Safety is not just having enough to survive, but having the environment in which to thrive, to live and exercise freedom of opportunity, to be free from fear or shame because of past choices or experiences.
 - We are united by a shared commitment to each other's thriving, safety, and joy. We are committed to a political structure that will serve as a vehicle for ensuring our shared self-determination as we achieve those outcomes. Our shared investment is in the quest to craft and practice values that honor sacred humanity and to become a place where there is room for all experiences, and identities to thrive.
 - We practice care as a counter to the shame mindset. Care is also how we ensure safety, shared abundance, and the space for growth.

NARRATIVE FRAMEWORKS IN PRACTICE

This work is an experiment in creating a skeleton of the stories we tell about ourselves and each other, and about belonging in the future America we are nurturing. We aim for these narratives to be malleable-useful as a package or in pieces, helpful to the formation of narrative strategy and messaging, versatile as a tray in the toolbox for campaigners, cultural institutions, and communicators that are developing a longer arc for their community-building and social-transformation work.

We approach this work through continuous iteration, testing, and evaluation of the narratives and our key hypotheses. So far, our testing has focused on the words and phrases within the narrative frames. We have also been developing other components of the narrative framework that can help add more color to how we define ourselves beyond white supremacy culture.

The story of this aspirational American identity is conveyed not only through language, but also through practices that embody the narrative.

1. Demonstrating moral consensus.

What has been described by many as the crumbling of American society and norms or a break in the social construct, 6 is a powerful demonstration of the misalignment of the identities and values of a growing majority in the US from the values they see idealized through the dominant American identity, institutions and culture.

When our movements try to organize people to win political and policy victories that more closely align with the emerging values while still moving within the dominant culture, this fundamental misalignment leaves people feeling frustrated and discarded.

Organizing and mobilizing to make visible the new moral consensus puts people in situations where they have to choose a side — old values versus a new moral consensus — and provides people the needed opportunities to experience and opt into that consensus.⁷ It can help shape the emerging identity into something that is more tangible and enticing.

Demonstrating moral consensus can also look like strategists, progressive movements, and thought leaders emphasizing the pleasure and power of acting as one. Not simply for the protection of our individual rights but because of the value and opportunity that comes from acts of solidarity for the collective. This is less about telling a story about feeling good, and more about the need to take action to express the values that we want folks to align with.

⁶ New Republic; America's Social Contract is Broken, May 2020

⁷ One of the findings emerging from SEJ's research on the state of dissent through the Direct Action Innovation Lab (forthcoming) suggests that engaging in direct action or mass demonstration can be a way to signal alignment around values of the majority, as opposed to simply a rejection of regressive policies, politicians, or the status quo. Our research there suggests that direct action or mass demonstration may be more effective at mobilizing people toward progressive movements. For example, the moral declaration that Black Lives Matter may have started as a seemingly divisive issue in 2014 and 2015. However, the backlash by an active opposition (embodied, for instance, by Trump and the MAGA faction) clarified the two moral poles people could occupy on the issue of racism and bias. "Black Lives Matter" became a unifying call to action that undergirded the largest and longest mass protest in history in the summer of 2020.

2. Cultivating reverence for life, beyond the grind.

One way that white supremacy culture is expressed in the dominant American identity is through rugged individualism and an emphasis on one's ability to be productive as a measure of value or belonging. Obsessing over economic productivity as a major indicator of belonging separates us from other parts of our individual identities and furthers the myth of sameness or monolithic ways of being. It also places those who are unable or blocked from producing profit automatically outside of belonging. This dynamic is relevant beyond the question of who is and isn't able to work. The notion of productivity as a measure of worthiness, success and belonging, sometimes referred to as "grind culture", impacts what we teach school children, how we treat unpaid caregivers, isolate the disabled, and how our society allocates resources. People outside of the grind are less likely to have access to the care and resources they need to survive and thrive.

Creating opportunities to express ourselves and who we are outside of the grind can create more space to normalize and see value in identities, experiences, and cultures that don't put productivity or profit at the center. So much of what we do and who we are in our communities is outside of the grind. Curiosity, celebration, joy, and care are just some of the ways that we can be in the flow and create reference or appreciation for parts of life that don't require people to be compartmentalized or commodified. Our expressions can look like: performing song and dance, meditation, community rituals, water ceremonies, body movement, or spending time outside.

Acknowledging and celebrating ancestors can also be a critical practice for cultivating reverence for l ife beyond the grind. Dominant American culture strips away connection to many of our origin stories and our relationship to the people and places we come from. This is done by force – particularly for indigenous and Black people – or by "choice" coerced by the promise of proximity to whiteness. Reconnecting and reclaiming those parts of who we are that we have learned to abandon to belong to today's American identity provide tangible steps towards a new American identity that fundamentally holds life sacred and valuable beyond production.

3. Accountability, not perfection

As we shift our perspective of American history away from one of shame, guilt, or denial, we also have an opportunity to shift our view and approach to addressing the legacy of harm stemming from that history. The concept of "accountability, not perfection" is a practice of the value, "come as you are, grow as you go" and is currently applied, to various extents, in schools and communities committed to transformative justice processes. Perhaps an antidote to the myth of "cancel culture," this approach to accountability recognizes that harm happens on both the interpersonal and an institutional or systemic level. We can begin to heal and move forward from these instances, while still honoring the sacred humanity in all of us, by: recognizing the full extent of the harm, creating mechanisms for those responsible to name and claim their role in harm, and affirming those committed to being held accountable still belong and can continue to have a place in our shared identity.

This type of practice is common in institutions that utilize a model of transformative justice to respond to harm. We have even seen examples of this in mainstream politics. In 2019, the organizing collective known as Black Womxn For introduced the concept of Accountability, Not Perfection in their endorsement process for the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary.

⁸ Grind Culture: How It's Exploiting Millennials, December 2020

After agreeing to this principle as a term of receiving their endorsment, Senator Elizabeth Warren made a statement about the death penalty and incarcerated people dying in prison that was out of step with Black Womxn For's values. In line with the "accountability not perfection" agreement, the group and Sen. Warren met to address the issue, or rather than the group immediately withdrawing the endorsement. Senator Warren listened to organizers' concerns with her statement, took steps to publicly account for her misstep, and committed to a more humane posture toward incarcerated people moving forward. The relationship deepened, rather than fractured, from the experience.

Another example of accountability not perfection in popular culture occurred when recording artist Lizzo released a single in 2022 including language that has been a source of pain and ridicule for many people with disabilities, and she was publicly called into accountability by activists within the disabled community. Instead of leaning into shame and guilt, Lizzo took the opportunity to acknowledge the past harms, her role in continuing that practice through her lyrics, and quickly offered an apology and redress by removing the hurtful language and re-releasing the song.

These examples are not to the scale or magnitude of some of the historical harms that will need to be named and accounted for as we move to a new shared identity; yet, they do offer a model that can be used to begin a process of addressing harm that does not place blame, shame and rejection on one another. Accountability, not perfection is not just a practice that can apply to dealing with historical violence or in relationship with politicians. There are every day manifestations of white supremacy culture and violence that we perpetuate without full awareness. Institutions and political leaders can model this but so can each of us in our everyday interactions with one another.

GOVERNIFOR, AND

CONCLUSION

The Bridge Project began by asking an important and audacious question, "What could it mean to identify as an American, without white supremacy as the baseline? What does it mean to belong in the United States of America when proximity to whiteness and white supremacy culture are not a factor?" The failings of the American experiment as it has been conducted thus far are stinging, pervasive, and a threat to our future.

Many of our movements are focused on fighting for the short- and long-term transformers to institutions and structures we need to thrive. And, in order to change how we govern, who we govern for, and what our responsibility is to one another, we must reimagine who we are as a people and reframe the stories we tell about ourselves. The findings of this research and the narrative frames and practices that accompany them are an attempt to begin that reimagining and transformation process.

This report is not offering all the answers, in fact we hope it raises more questions than provides answers. In the next phase of this project we hope to explore a number of questions including:

How well do these narratives resonate with values, ideals, and strategies currently expressed by social justice movements in the US?

Do these narratives inspire hope, belonging, and action toward belonging amongst segments of our target audience?

How do nonwhite audiences - specifically, Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Asian and Pacific Islander connect with these frames? How do other audiences connect to them?

Can these narratives be successful and effective at moving people toward a reframed American identity and way of being, without a specific policy or political action to support?

How are these narrative frameworks useful in the context of current campaigns? How do we begin to move toward the reframed American identity in the current political and cultural reality?

Can these narratives be successful and effective at polarizing people toward an identity and way of being, without a specific person or character cast as villain?

We are approaching narrative change from the perspective of telling a story from the future, then looking backward to inform the stories told today. The stories of the past and present are too limited for the expansive future we know we need and deserve. We hope the Bridge Project can inspire and shift what you think is possible for the story of America in 2052. We encourage you to engage it actively—and share what you're learning back with us at BridgeProject@sejleaders.org.

