

*When Someone Steals
Your Soul:*

Repatriating Narratives *in the* Nonprofit Sector

by the editors

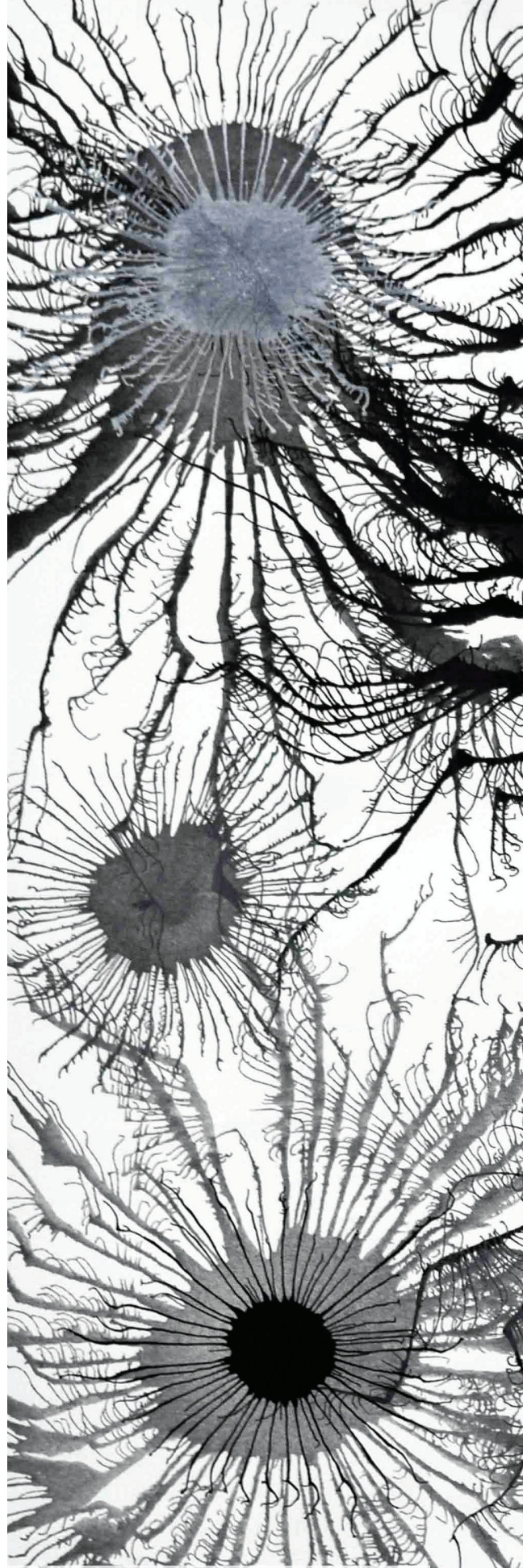
"There is a reason why the words **narrative** and **colonization** keep popping up lately in movement circles. Until the narratives about the 'disadvantaged,' 'underserved,' 'dependent,' 'at risk,' 'opportunity' folks are shaped, relanguaged, and owned by those same folks, the tales told about them will be mostly absurd and will drain power from the building of a strong, sustainable, shared future."

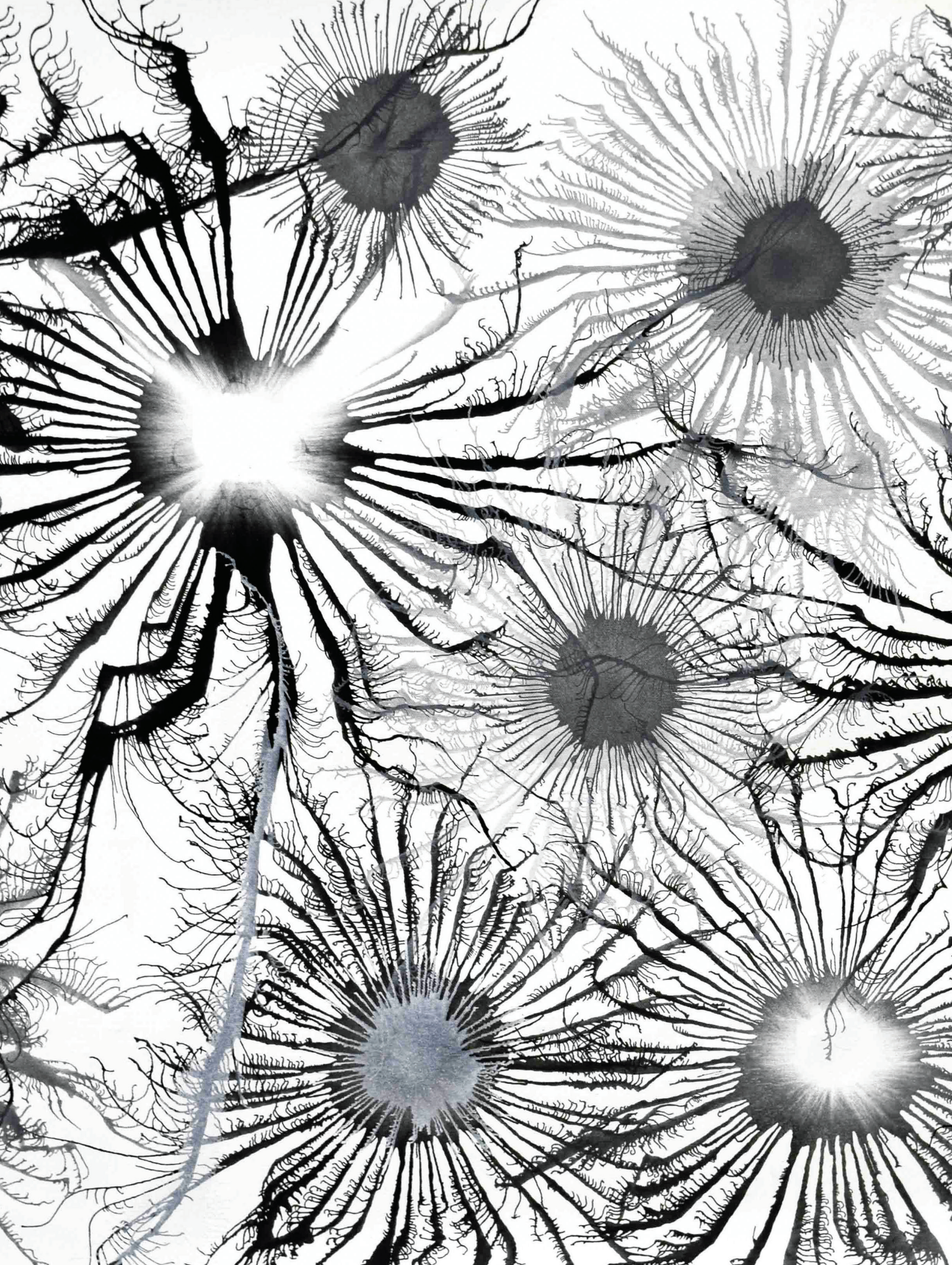
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IF WE WERE TO GUESS WHY SO-CALLED "ELITES" ARE so disliked by others, I might suggest that we look to the habit of defining the reality of others and making neat little rationalization packages that insult the protagonists, then creating prescriptions for their betterment, thank you very much. The comfortable do-gooder creates stories about why things are the way they are, and then decides that one or another intervention will be just the thing to turn the situation around. A book (or twenty) is written, creating a self-reinforcing field; and two or three generations later, the same people are thanking one another for their service, and basic dynamics of social and economic subjugation remain intact.





In short, those metanarratives are present to keep a system mostly intact in terms of making meaning of the world, even if the meaning that is being made does not conform to what we experience or want for our collective future.

Elites have cordoned themselves off, and their subjects are in the process of doing the same—much to the discomfort and surprise of those elites—and why not? What self-respecting person would allow herself to be diagnosed by another with no experience of her situation and with no consultation? Much of the philanthropic and nonprofit sector should be brought up on charges of experimenting, without consent, on human subjects. As Edgar Villanueva writes in *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*: “Philanthropy, honey, it’s time for an intervention.”¹

There is a reason why the words *narrative* and *colonization* keep popping up lately in movement circles. Until the narratives about the “disadvantaged,” “underserved,” “dependent,” “at risk,” “opportunity” folks are shaped, relanguaged, and owned by those same folks, the tales told about them will be mostly absurd and will drain power from the building of a strong, sustainable, shared future. As James Baldwin wrote in *The Devil Finds Work*: “The victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim; he, or she, has become a threat.”²

Fifty years ago, it was normal for parents to spank their children—“spare the rod, spoil the child.” Forty years ago, it was normal for the killing of a woman in a domestic violence incident to be referred to as a “crime of passion.” The reason why both characterizations of interpersonal violence are no longer countenanced and legitimated in that way is because the narratives about them have been disrupted. In neither case did the behavior stand by itself; it was not only supported by descriptive language of the sort listed above, but that descriptive language brought the listener/reader back to other metanarratives designed to make sense of the world. Those metanarratives and their derivative phrases gain traction through repetition, as FrameWorks Institute’s Mackenzie Price explains in a 2018 interview with *NPQ*—that is, repetition that varies with the narrator sufficiently to create a new common-assumption bubble.³

Color Of Change’s Rashad Robinson talks about the need not just for a higher shared consciousness about the importance of narrative

but also for an infrastructure to create and reinforce new narratives that explicitly build not just meaning but power (see “Changing Our Narrative about Narrative: The Infrastructure Required for Building Narrative Power,” in this edition). In fact, there is almost no story you can tell that does not attach itself to another, larger story (a metanarrative) about what is and isn’t considered “normal.” Often it takes only a few words to recall the weight of the whole kit and kaboodle of the metanarrative—which may, in the case of family violence, involve a whole lot of patriarchal thinking.

The conceptual framework that holds that the man is the “leader” and protector of the family (and, by extension, the universe) may seem patently ridiculous in light of the realities we live, but when held up as the norm it is a powerful guide to meaning making (and compensation setting), even if we have to turn things inside out to make it all fit. Thus, you may have Dr. Phil declaring the need to “end the silence on domestic violence” while on the same show admonishing men to be the leaders of their families they were meant to be.

In short, those metanarratives are present to keep a system mostly intact in terms of making meaning of the world, even if the meaning that is being made does not conform to what we experience or want for our collective future.

In *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense*, editors Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews suggest that the power of these metanarratives is in their internalization, and thus “we become the stories we know.”⁴

The only way we can extricate ourselves from living our lives in the shadow of or even inside of stories that are deadly to our sensibilities and potential is, they contend, to resist through counternarratives that contain as much or more complexity, depth, and meaning as the dominant narrative. This, they say, quoting Richard Delgado, is particularly important for those whose consciousness “has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized.”⁵ In other words, the rupturing of the dominant narrative must be a multidimensional effort and repeated

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wherever the old metanarrative is being trotted out for a reinforcing run around the block.

Thirty years ago, we were still ensnared in a definition of family that required two genders strictly defined. Moving that notion took a resistance that was built over time and from many voices and images and stories.

In “Changing Our Narrative about Narrative,” Robinson writes, “To get to marriage equality, we had to focus on changing power dynamics, not just emotional dynamics, and pursuing both in an integrated way required a mature, strategic narrative approach.” And although Bamberg and Andrews believe that dominant narratives are less stable than they appear, challenging them is an exhausting and sometimes marginalizing enterprise for any one person. It requires a constant repudiation and negotiation of terms. Back again to Robinson, who writes, “We need actual human beings serving as our main vehicle for achieving narrative change—people equipped, talented, motivated, and networked to effectively spread new and compelling stories.” This, he asserts, will move our ideas into the “normative” position.

But for those ideas to be worthy of moving into a more normative position, we must interrogate ourselves and what we support by omission or commission. Villanueva writes that often, in this sector, we accept our own behavior even when it conflicts with what we say we are working for. Specifically, he writes of philanthropy:

It is (we are) a period play, a costume drama, a fantasy of entitlement, altruism, and superiority. Far too often, it creates (we create) division and suffering rather than progress and healing.

It is (we are) a sleepwalking sector, white zombies spewing the money of dead white people in the name of charity and benevolence.

It is (we are) colonialism in the empire's newest clothes.

It is (we are) racism in institutional form.⁶

But back to the idea of colonization, which entails not just the attempted conquering of land and people but also national identities. In “Museums: Nonprofits in the Eye of the Perfect Narrative Storm,” we talk about the role of those institutions in anchoring dominant narratives, and quote Prince Kum'a Ndumbe III of the Duala people in Cameroon, who runs AfricAvenir International, a Pan-Africanist nonprofit that calls for the restitution of artifacts taken without consent: “This is not just about the return of African art,” he says. “When someone's stolen your soul, it's very difficult to survive as a people.”⁷

NOTES

1. Edgar Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), Introduction.
2. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Dial Press, 1976).
3. “Reframing Narratives, Resetting Reality: A Conversation with Mackenzie Price of the FrameWorks Institute,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 31–35.
4. *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense*, ed. Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews (Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004).
5. *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 60.
6. Villanueva, *Decolonizing Wealth*, Introduction.
7. “Museums: Nonprofits in the Eye of the Perfect Narrative Storm,” *Nonprofit Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 48–59.

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