

PART III

**COMMUNITY
BUILDING
IS CULTURE**



WIČHÓYANKE

A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE

BY

CLEMENTINE BORDEAUX & MARY V. BORDEAUX

My sister and I grew up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, a place our ancestors were made to stay after signing treaties with the United States government. If you google Pine Ridge Reservation, the top question is, "is it safe to travel to the Pine Ridge Reservation?" - with a definitive answer of "don't travel there at night." It is funny and not so funny at the same time. This place, this land, this community in which we were born and grew up, is our favorite place in the world. Pine Ridge is where we feel the safest, the most comfortable, and the most loved.

There is a lot we could tell you about Pine Ridge, and while the histories and making of the reservation are essential, that is not the focus of this essay. We could share stories of our long conversations on dusty reservation roads deemed unsafe by outsiders. Instead, we offer a few critical Lakota concepts for building community. We ground ourselves in these concepts because they were introduced to us on the Pine Ridge Reservation, a place we know intimately and where our foundation for community comes from - this place of our family and ancestors. We offer kinship and push for being a good relative. We want to be clear that these are not steps to building community, but understanding how the community can work together.



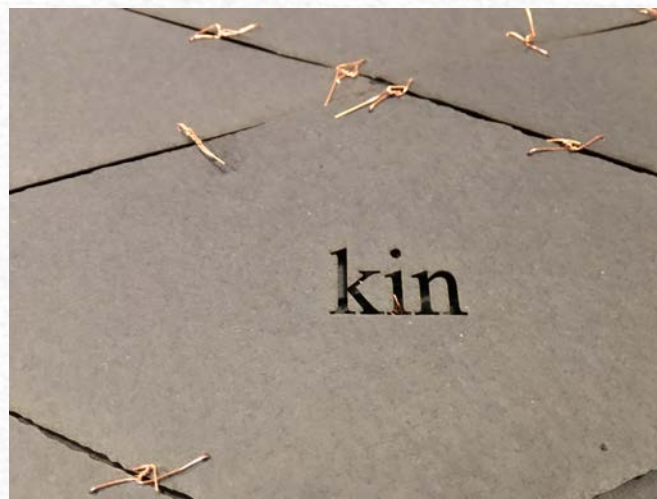
TAKEN FROM THE SAPA (BLACK HILLS) LOOKING TOWARD PINE RIDGE
PHOTO CREDIT MARY BORDEAUX.



Dakota scholar Ella C. Deloria states, "All peoples who live communally must first find some way to get along together harmoniously and with a measure of decency and order" (Deloria, 1979, p.38). She outlines the importance of kinship, being a good relative, not dealing with strangers, and establishing relationships. While Deloria is a Dakota scholar and we are Lakota, the Dakota and Lakota people are of the same large group, the Oceti Sakowin, and have similar ways of being and doing. Our understanding of communally working is grounded in family obligation and responsibility. But not the toxic "we are all a family" rhetoric that often is co-opted by capitalist structures. Rather, the responsibility and obligations of finding harmony in community. While we might not have articulated it in that way a few years ago, we have been doing some work to better understand our Lakota-ness, and the broader engagement of Oceti Sakowin peoples, in the ways that we work.

"OUR UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNALLY WORKING IS GROUNDED IN FAMILY OBLIGATION AND RESPONSIBILITY."

We have thought about community and kinship through Lakota and Dakota scholars and our lived experiences. It is complicated and not easy to be in kinship or a good relative. The misunderstanding and the weaponizing that can happen when asking someone to be a good relative because of colonial entanglements can harm relatives and the community (D. Nelson, personal communication March 2022). The heavy mental, emotional, and intellectual lifting of "being a good relative" is grounded in getting to know and support a specific place based on the history and knowledge of that region's land, culture, and community. It is not like we all join hands and get along; it takes hard work, understanding, care, and so many things.



CLOSE UP OF DIAMOND ON PIECE "OBLIGATION" BY LAYLI LONG SOLDIER.
PHOTO CREDIT - RACING MAGPIE.



Lakota kinship is a complex network of ideas and formations of relationality dictated by virtues, ceremonies, and lineages and can differ from community to community. Some individuals might simply define kinship as blood or genetic relationships (sharing DNA). However, biology used in this manner upholds racial constructs that undermine the authority and sovereignty of tribal kinship bonds (TallBear, 2003, p. 96). But simply stating that you are being “good” does not equate to actionable accountability. From our experiences, practicing “good” relationality is following Lakota virtues and ceremonial practices and also challenging our relatives when they perpetuate harm. Furthermore, being a good relative is defined by the intentional and common practices that unite us as relatives.

We strive to be good relatives at [Racing Magpie](#), a creative space with a gallery, artist studios, and flexible community space. Centering on community needs and focusing on the process of working together, we gather artists, creatives, and the Lakota community to collectively examine the understanding of community. We work towards kinship to ground ourselves in place, land, and creativity. The aim is to deepen an artistic and intellectual scholarship of Lakota language and philosophy through creative practices.

For example, in the summer of 2017, *Responsibilities and Obligations: Understanding Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ*, an interactive art exhibition, opened at Racing Magpie. This inaugural exhibition at Racing Magpie demonstrated the collaborative kinship that creative practice embodies through community building. Co-curated by us (Clementine and Mary), alongside Layli Long Soldier, the exhibition resulted in interactive installations and was framed as a reflective and conceptual journey highlighting Lakota female perspectives surrounding Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ and the implications of the phrase. *Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ* is a phrase from the Lakota culture that loosely translates to “we are all related” or “all my relatives.” The phrase, used commonly by Lakota and non-Lakota alike, has been appropriated as an all-encompassing idea of inclusiveness. The exhibition was an opportunity to engage with our relatives and their reflections on being a good relative, while also challenging our communities to take responsibility and think critically about their obligations to their local communities. The ability to utilize creative practice to build community is indicative of kinship.



RESPONSIBILITIES & OBLIGATIONS EXHIBITION PHOTOS
PHOTO CREDIT MARY BORDEAUX.



In conclusion, we turn to another literary ancestor, Dakota artist Zitkala-Sa. She writes in her poem "The Indians Awakening" that a "harmonious kinship made all things fair" (Zitkala Sa, 2003, p. 184). Although she is referring to the changing dynamic in the lives of American Indians as we transition to reservation life, we understand her poem to be a reminder of harmonious kinship before colonial entanglements. The harmony created through kinship protocols is embedded in the idea of "being a good relative" and building the togetherness of community.

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AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION

EPISODE 3 —

COMMUNITY BUILDING IS CULTURE

KEYWORDS

FIELD

COMMON

ARTISTS

SPACE

MURAL

COMMUNITY

ART

PLACES

FOLKS

CREATED

ORGANIZATION

CENTERED

PROJECT

PEOPLE

COMMUNITIES

MUSEUM

[Music fades in]

00:08 **Narrator 1**

Welcome to *Common Work: Learnings for the Future from Common Field*. This is the organization's final project as it closes in December 2022. In this four-part podcast and writing series, we'll explore what we've learned together through the life, work, and closing of Common Field, a network-centered arts nonprofit organization. You'll also hear about artist-centered work pushing our field forward today, and our dreams for the future of creative sustainability from network members across the country.

Each podcast episode is paired with commissioned writings from Ikram Lakhdhari, writer and former Common Field staff member, Racing Magpie cofounder, Mary Bordeaux, with artist Clementine Bordeaux; Allison Freedman Weisberg and Shaun Leonardo, co-directors of Recess; and Common Field board members, Sarah Williams and Jackie Clay.

You can access these writings, additional episodes in the series, and project materials for *Common Work: Learnings for the Future* on CommonField.org through April 2023. Beyond that, you can access the project in full on our platform partner websites, including Jack Straw Cultural Center and Lohar Projects.

Thank you for listening.

[Music fades out]

1:34 Narrator 2

You are listening to Episode Three: Community Building is Culture. This episode welcomes network members to discuss the criticality of community building for the possibilities of cultural expression. Together, they will talk about the ways their organizations and projects are carrying this work forward today. This group discussion includes Lorie Mertes, Executive Director of Locust Projects in Miami, Florida, Vashti Dubois, founder and Executive Director of the Colored Girls Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Matthew Fluharty, co founder of The Art of the Rural with headquarters in Winona, Minnesota.

[Music fades in and out]

02:21 Lorie Mertes

Hi, Matthew. Hi, Vashti.

02:24 Vashti DuBois

Hi, how are you, Lorie?

02:26 Lorie Mertes

Really good to regroup after our initial little chat for today. And [for] the Common Field communities culture, I'm Lorie Mertes, I'm the Executive Director of Locust Projects in Miami. And, Locust Projects is turning 25 next year. It is Miami's longest running alternative art space. Just maybe as a way of kind of to kick our conversation off: I was thinking, Vashti, you talked about the word imagining, and I'm curious where resilience might come into things. Do you all have any thoughts?

03:07 Vashti DuBois

For starters, I'm Vashti Dubois, and I'm the Executive Director and the founder of the Colored Girls Museum. I'm in Philadelphia, I've been here for 21 years. You know, so the Colored Girls Museum celebrates ordinary women and girls of the African diaspora, through the submission of art and artifacts, which is significant to our experience. So what makes anything matter is that we say so, which is not a privilege afforded, certainly not [to] ordinary women and girls of the African diaspora. To respond to this word, like, "imagination," it has been a word that has followed me my whole life. I imagine everything. I imagine what I want. I imagine what I need. I'm always imagining how the creative community is really always wanting to create the next thing that might have us, at least in the metaphorical rooms, together.

So while the community that I serve is very specific, in the words of the great Lorraine Hansberry, I understand that in order to be universal, you have to be specific. When you look at the ordinary, anything, you then begin to notice its extraordinary qualities. And you don't have to imagine that, right? It's actually there, it's there for the taking. At this moment in Common Field's lifecycle, it's an interesting time for all of us to be thinking about what we imagine in the lifecycle of the work that we do as creatives; in the lifecycle of our own institutions and communities that we support and represent.

05:22 **Lorie Mertes**

I came to Locust because it's a space [...], I like to say a space of "Yes." Having worked in institutions, museums specifically, that spend a little more time negotiating or compromising an artist's ideas and what they imagine, so, having a space of "Yes," where an artist can jackhammer the floors, and artists can hang swings from the ceiling, all in support of an artist experimenting to push their practice. One of the things in thinking about this imagining, [...] Locust is at this sort of beginning of something new, and I'm questioning, the closer we get to being more of an institution, do we get further away from being able to be that space of "Yes"? To me I feel like as museums are being challenged in terms of their funding structures and governance, it feels like this is the time where this community—the Common Field community—is so relevant and resonant. And how do we support resilience? What do you think, Matthew?

06:35 **Matthew Fluharty**

There is so much that resonates with me from what you all have shared. I guess I feel like I'm sort of walking down this hallway, thinking about these acts of imagining, and also sort of, that kind of radical space of "Yes." I think in some respects when you say the word "imagination," in a really general sense in our lexicon to folks, it's viewed as a singular thing. A lot of the power of Common Field, and of these kinds of conversations in the spaces that folks just create, is that when it's powerful, it's communal. I'm from Appalachian Ohio, and the visual culture in a lot of sort of non-urban places, particularly [like] the ones I'm from in Appalachia, is murals. That's kind of the entry point. There's a town really close to where I live that has a mural. The mural is sort of like the history of that town. It's pretty much specific to that cultural sort of white settler culture, that history. But the other side of the building doesn't have anything.

I think that's like the growth area. Where is, like the radical Yes? Because like that Yes, is a communal Yes. It's harder for Yes to be singular, you know; a Yes is really dependent on other folks.

07:47 **Lorie Mertes**

Yeah, there has to be trust for there to be Yes. There has to be this sort of understanding. It's not just that, you know, as a director, I'm walking in the door and saying, Locust is a space of Yes! No, there's a whole infrastructure that supports that. Vashti, you actually have carved out this idea of creating space or holding space we talked about. Where does "Yes" fit for you?

08:16 **Vashti DuBois**

The Colored Girls Museum aspires to be a place of Yes for the communities that we seek to serve. As a space that really sees ourselves as a community museum, first and foremost, for the kinds of communities that typically [...]. Spaces are not created with our communities in mind. Saying Yes to that community by opening the doors, and really exploring, from a sort of historical perspective, a spiritual perspective, and emotional perspective, this idea of radical homemaking. So often people will say, "what a brilliant idea, how did you think of it?" And I say, I didn't think of it. First of all, the history of museums are homes. During segregation, everything had to be done in community space and in your home space. So, this is just really falling back on a history which has always been, because we are restricted by economics, by racism, by sexism, by all of these things. There are moments in the work that we do, however much you want to have the spirit of Yes, you also have to acknowledge the places where interestingly enough, Yes is not enough. It's a particular challenge for anyone who is sort of moving into this art and community space, because you recognize the toll and the responsibility of an aspiration to say Yes, as often as possible. But I think you have to be really mindful of that, in particular, if you are [a] woman. "I'll say yes" is real.

10:19 **Lorie Mertes**

First thing off the tongue. (laughing) "Oh, we can do it, I can do it, make it happen." I really appreciated this, because I am very much struggling with that idea of sustaining that culture of "Yes." And that "Yes" is to a particular community; it's to the community that founded this organization, so trying to stay loyal to what was the founding premise of the three artists who started Locust. It was about artists.

Matthew, you talking about murals and the work that you do in the public sphere, also the experience of art being in the community, both of the spaces your work and your practice has inhabited is exactly where the work of art originally began, which I think is really interesting.

11:13 Matthew Fluharty

I mean, it's interesting because it takes me back. I am grateful to think about the mural again, in a different way. I feel that I don't talk about murals much, but I feel it and that what you're sharing is taking me to a really profound organization that we've been working with called the Huck Finn Freedom Center in Hannibal, [Missouri]. Which is many things, but I think folks would describe it as kind of a vernacular Black history museum in Hannibal, which is the town that Mark Twain was originally from. It gets a lot of cultural tourism, and has a very one dimensional story about, certainly about his history, but also about what it is as a community right now. It created for me this question around, what would a mural do in this situation versus deeper engagement with the really deep unacknowledged history of a place? Which is what the Freedom Center is doing in Hannibal. So that's resonating with me in that, we're talking about a kind of art form, but also within it a question about what is possible and where the Yes is. And I'm curious, what the dimensions of what that looks like in urban communities as well.

12:17 Vashti DuBois

You know, what you raise here, right, which again, Common Field's decision to sunset now is a perfect example of that. That so often, you find yourself in order to say Yes, you have to say No. In the No is the next possibility. Because you can't say yes to everything and get anything done. I am just really learning that. Sometimes at the museum because we have artists, curators, or, we really work with sort of an apprenticeship model. So when people come into the space to work, again, our aspiration is like, "yes, that's fantastic. Go for it!" (Laughing) That has created more work than we can actually manage, as creatives who find ourselves in administrative positions. And so, doing this peculiar dance with our artistry, trying to hold on to it on the one hand, and then manage these "resources," on the other hand, so that we can sustain ourselves, right? It is, in my view, impossible to do that if there isn't a learned understanding of where the stops have to be. No's are just another path. They are not the end of anything. They are another possibility. And that's not something that I think we often are comfortable thinking about.

14:02 **Lorie Mertes**

Vashti, I'm curious. In your role, because obviously you are a tremendous mentor, you talked about the artists, the curators, the interns. What is your sort of aspiration for some of them?

14:23 **Vashti DuBois**

When I held all these executive director leadership positions, I always would say to the staff, "My goal is to make you executive director-proof." Right? My goal is to know that if I don't walk through those doors one day, you know absolutely what it is that needs to be done, and you're fine. I really don't believe that things have to exist into perpetuity just because we created them. From the moment the Colored Girls Museum had her first exhibition, I saw my job as really working myself out of the position of moving this forward by myself. Because things don't succeed that way. We can really look at our field, and see how that is the case. That if you're not really, sort of conscious and committed to creating space for new leadership, not just when you leave, but while you're there. I started a theater company when I was 26 in New York City, because I knew I had the imagination, the energy, the drive, and the skills to do something more than get somebody's coffee. But I could see, based on what other people were doing that, I was really in the space of having to wait my turn. I was definitely afraid that I would be waiting my turn until I was 50. And I might have been. So I really encourage, in particular any young women of African diaspora I meet. Because people are always telling us "be more humble," "wait your turn," "it's not your time," "you need more skills," and yet, nobody wants to give you more skills. I tell people the truth as I understand it. Nobody's going to necessarily give you permission to live your biggest life, the only person who can really do that is you.

16:17 **Lorie Mertes**

So you know, I was thinking about the rise of artists run spaces, alternative art spaces. We came through a field where they didn't teach us a lot of things. I just think of where we are in this space, because we're all again, in a space that's been kind of created in the last 25 years, and this idea of what's next.

16:43 **Matthew Fluharty**

From my own experience in that timeline, it seems like a lot of sort of the non-urban field has kind of come into focus, maybe in the last decade of that last 25 years. Which corresponds with definite social and political things that happened in that last decade, as well.

I go back to that word, all of the artifacts or the practices, which are like deeply intimate to our everyday life of being a part of an organization and a community doing work, also kind of emanate out to this larger scale. I think about the path of Art of the Rural. That has been the moment when like the monster truck has almost gone off the cliff, you know. (laughing) One has to be reminded of their responsibility and how interdependent we are. I think just about the growth of Art of the Rural, there's like a capitalist structure at work, whose primary calculus is "get bigger" and that somehow is a signifier for the health or the impact or the longevity, whatever that means, of an organization. In the places that I know well intimately, those have been the very pathologies that have created pain in our communities.

18:01 **Lorie Mertes**

You describe the organization as a de-centered, collaborative organization. Is there a way to remain so?

18:11 **Matthew Fluharty**

It sounds like you have been eavesdropping on our conversations internally. (laughing) Yeah. This is the thing, Lorie, when you said that. Like, that sounds really amazing, it being de-centered and collaborative. Those are our values for sure. But man, in practice, it's really challenging. How was power held? Because at the end of the day we are working with capital. How do we collectively make decisions? What this looks like, in terms of Art to the Rural is that we have a couple sort of major initiatives. Those really are run by the folks who run [...]. That is not me making decisions; the folks who are doing the rural Urban Exchange in Kentucky, they're deciding where resources go, where that program goes, the connections they're making, how they describe it, etc., etc. That never translates into some kind of slick elevator pitch about what we do. You know, I think that for a long time that was a real challenge for folks with our organization. Like, "what, I don't even know what they do." And there are days that I don't know, if I'm just being honest with you all. (laughing) I know where the heart is of the work. But I mean how does that dynamic work for you all, because you all are running efforts that are community-based, de-centered, collaborative in nature, power is shared. What does that look like for you all?

19:32 **Vashti DuBois**

It comes up in all of these really interesting and subtle, and not so subtle ways.

I think one of my skills is that I can [...], it takes me five minutes to figure out what somebody is really really good at, even if they're not good at it yet. Really just opening up space for people to do what they do. The part of me that's a really good parent is the part that can deal with the mess of like really saying, "Okay well, how are you going to work that out?" But I, as an artist, I just feel like that's such an essential part of the work. And I learned so much from my own dis-ease [by] looking at messiness that I'm willing to deal with it, but not everybody is. So people, I wanna be led, but they don't want to be led. It's the push and pull of it all. And I think we just have to be really honest about that. I'm curious about how other people are dealing with it. I'm just living with the shitshow, frankly.

20:39 Lorie Mertes

We all know that through collaboration, we're better. But at the same time, this is a big week in Miami. It's a big nonprofit "give-Miami" day, it's dialing for dollars. We're all ruthlessly, cutthroatedly, going "get out of my way, let me go after these donors!" So there's a limit to where that collaborative spirit can take us because we're all at the end of the day trying to uphold these spaces and these places that we've created and trying to sustain. Because I think the other side is, Common Field brought us together. So how do we stay together? Is that important? I think it is, I think you'd agree. But how do we, what fills the space of connectivity for us as Common Field goes away?

21:31 Matthew Fluharty

You know, I was thinking about our conversation today, and just kind of reflecting on just like, all of the things that I know that Common Field has brought for me and for the folks that I know. And just those like really warm human times where we were together at various gatherings. And, you know, like, when one goes into a room, whether it's physical or digital, and we're able to have conversations like this, you know, like, a lot of this is a shit show. And I'm, like, really grateful that that was like said out loud, you know, and like the Commons, the Commons is a shitshow. But like, it's beautiful, and things grow there. It's so powerful, we can almost lose sight of it sometimes.

22:14 Vashti DuBois

I always liked the name Common Field. What does connect us always, whether we're in conversation or not, is this common field. This common field of creativity, imagination, entrepreneurship. I love sunsets.

And what I know about every sunset is that there's always a sunrise. So I don't fear sunset, I don't fear disconnection. My relationship was, and continues to be, with how the field is feeling and what we all have in common out here. Like I said, we're not always connected in a daily way. But we're connected by our intention to really make a better world, it doesn't always turn out as we would like. And sometimes some of us have to move off stage so that other folks can move forward—and I think that's rich and beautiful, and brave.

23:18 **Lorie Mertes**

It's just really been an honor to get to talk to you both.

23:21 **Matthew Fluharty**

man, I really hope this conversation leads us to like actually being in person somewhere in the years ahead.

23:27 **Lorie Mertes**

Come on down! (laughing)

23:29 **Vashti DuBois**

Iguanas and all

23:30 **Lorie Mertes**

I'll put some iguanas in your suitcase on the way back...

23:33 **Vashti DuBois**

(laughing) No doubt

(all laughing)

[Music fades in]

23:41 **Narrator 3**

Thank you for listening to this episode of Common Work: Learnings for the Future from Common Field. This project was produced with Chris Tyler and Raquel DuToit, graphic design by Alexis Smithwick and copyediting by Nicolay Duque. Jack Straw Cultural Center recorded, edited and produced this podcast series. Common Work: Learnings for the Future from Common Field was developed and curated by Sheetal Prajapati in collaboration with the Common Field team.

24:13 **Narrator 4**

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