

PEOPLE  
OVER  
PLASTIC

# IMPACT REPORT 2023



# MEDIA FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.

PEOPLE  
OVER  
PLASTIC



<b>ORIGINS</b>	<b>4</b>
Origins of PoP	5
Letter from our Co-Founders	6
Mission & Vision	8
Theory of Change	9

<b>IMPACT</b>	<b>11</b>
Reporting	12
Podcast	14
Story Salons	19
Social Media	21
The Margin	23

<b>FUNDING VALUES</b>	<b>24</b>
Funding Values	25

<b>LOOKING FORWARD</b>	<b>26</b>
Letter from our Executive Director	27



# ORIGINS



# ORIGINS OF POP

People over Plastic (PoP) was founded in October 2021 by Shilpi Chhotray and Patrice Simms to create a multicultural media platform for Environmental Justice.

## THE PROBLEM WITH TRADITIONAL MEDIA.

With her many years of experience serving as a media liaison for the Break Free from Plastic global movement, Chhotray was a go-to source on plastic pollution, climate change, and intersectionality. She frequently made appearances in the New York Times, NPR, Rolling Stone, BBC, and Al Jazeera. It did not take long for Chhotray to discover that **select perspectives dominate environmental discourse, while other voices are simply ignored.**

Too often coverage missed the mark.

Traditional media perpetuates false and harmful narratives by centering whiteness, ignoring voices from the frontlines, and emphasizing impacts on wildlife and the natural environment—but disregarding impacts on people of color and Indigenous communities who are disproportionately affected by climate, plastic, and environmental injustice.

## THE FAILURES OF LAW AND POLICY.

Patrice Simms currently serves as the VP of Litigation for Healthy Communities at EarthJustice. And as an environmental lawyer with decades of experience—including as a professor at Howard Law and Harvard Law, as an attorney with the Environmental Protection Agency, and as a political appointee with the Department of Justice—Simms **has a deep understanding of how environmental law and policy fail the communities that are most in need of protection and best positioned to shape solutions.**

## A NEW KIND OF STORYTELLING.

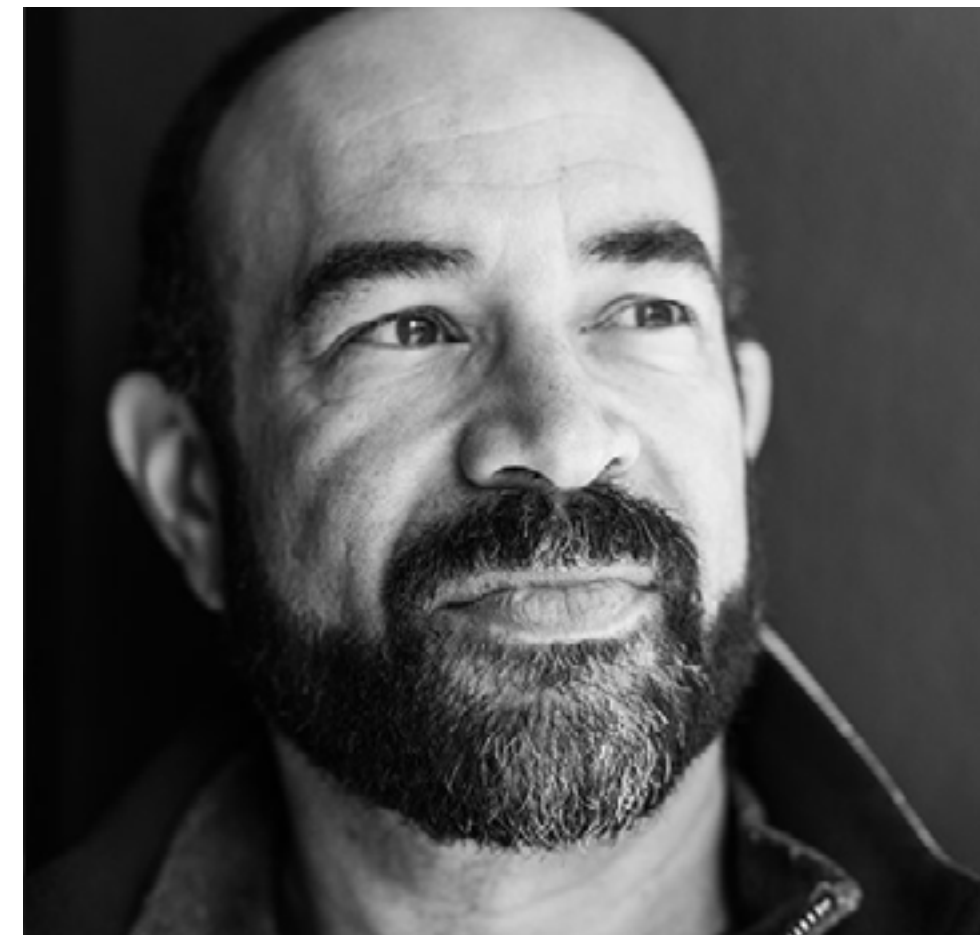
Together, Chhotray and Simms recognized the urgency and need for a new kind of storytelling that centers Environmental Justice.

PoP was founded to:

- Create counter-narratives** to combat the harmful, mainstream narratives that dominate discourse.
- Uplift and connect voices** from the frontlines.
- Emphasize the key connections** between social, racial, and climate justice.

[PoP is media for Environmental Justice.](#)





# LETTER FROM OUR CO-FOUNDERS

As we reflect on our journey, we are reminded of the transformative power of storytelling in our shared pursuit of Environmental Justice.

Since we launched People over Plastic nearly two-and-a-half years ago, our work has been guided by a steadfast commitment to amplifying the voices of Indigenous communities, Black communities, and historically excluded people of color — shining a much-needed spotlight on their lived experiences and expert perspectives. Through strategic media and grassroots community building, we've seen the impact of these stories firsthand: they've spread rapidly, sparked conversation, and driven change at the individual and societal level.

We harnessed plastic as a cultural lever and recognized its symbolic significance. Plastic embodies consumer society, is a cautionary tale of health and climate negligence, and a tangible reminder of the toxic legacy that so many communities of color are forced to carry. **But by reframing the narrative around plastic pollution as a social justice issue, we have inspired collective action and put Environmental Justice at the center of environmental discourse.**

The entire plastics life cycle presents a cascade of toxicity; spanning fossil fuel extraction to oil and gas pipelines; petrochemical processing to hazardous chemical transportation; and toxic products and workplaces to the challenges of waste management, landfills, incineration and micro-plastic pollution. While each of these issues is significant in its own right, we see the full life cycle as a springboard to advocate for comprehensive restructuring of power dynamics and privilege, aiming to address the root causes of environmental harm.

Centering the experiences and voices of frontline and fenceline communities has remained (and always will) a core principle for People over Plastic. In doing so, we aim to do our part in dismantling the systems of exploitation and marginalization that have allowed extractive industries to thrive at the expense of human health and ecological well-being.

At the beginning of this year, we were also excited to appoint community strategist, educator, and thought leader Michael McKenzie as our new Executive Director. With Michael at the helm, we are confident that our organization



will continue to engage, educate, and inspire audiences with stories from the frontlines of Environmental Justice.

Michael was most recently a Community Strategist with Taproot Earth working with over 400 frontline organizations across the Gulf South. Michael is passionate about environmental justice and youth advocacy and possesses a wealth of experience in housing justice, community engagement, fundraising, operations, coalition building, policy analysis, research, and narrative strategy.

What began as an internationally acclaimed podcast, has become much more. Our multimedia platform has expanded to include investigative reporting, in-person storytelling events, influencer shorts across intersectional topics, Solidarity Rides, and more. We remain committed to thought-provoking discussions and insightful conversations with leaders on the frontlines of Environmental Justice. We are incredibly proud of the team's accomplishments and are excited to share our successes and learnings with you.

With gratitude and determination,



Shilpi Chhotray,  
Co-Founder and President



Patrice Simms,  
Co-Founder and Strategic Advisor



From left to right: Roishetta Sibley Ozane, Dr. Joy Banner, Jo Banner, and Shamyra Lavigne at our New Orleans story salon during Essence Fest. July 2023.



AT POP, COVERING THE INTERSECTIONS  
OF RACE, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE,  
AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS ARE THE  
NORM — NOT THE EXCEPTION.



Participants at People over Plastic's collaboration with Hip Hop for Change for their 6th Annual Environmental Justice Summit.

### MISSION: CHANGE THE NARRATIVE.

We craft counter-narratives that center Environmental Justice, uplift unheard voices, and spotlight the connections between racial, social, and climate justice.

We are the only multicultural media platform of our kind, publishing stories by people of color, for people of color. Bringing together journalists, leaders, activists, artists, and community members, we deliver trusted stories for our people — and we do so in a way that is nuanced, sensitive, and in-depth.

Our approach puts our community first, empowering our audience to consider specific community-driven solutions and calls-to-action directly from impacted communities.

**When we change the narrative, we change the world.**

### VISION: SHIFTING POWER FROM EXTRACTORS TO JUSTICE.

We envision a future where frontline communities are free from the harmful impacts of petrochemical and industrial facilities, thriving in a just and equitable society, and leading the way to Environmental Justice.

# MISSION & VISION





From left to right: Dr. Ahimsa Porter Sumchai, Jan Andasan, and Casey Camp-Horinek center stage at the Hip Hop for Change 6th Environmental Justice Summit.

# THEORY OF CHANGE

CHANGE THE NARRATIVE,  
CHANGE THE WORLD.

**IF** we create media that reflects the experiences of Indigenous communities and people of color who are most impacted by — and best positioned to solve — environmental injustice, and share their stories using viral media and pop culture tactics,

**THEN** the dominant environmental narrative will be replaced by an inclusive, truth-based, human-centered discourse that is more powerful and more effective at shifting power from extractors to justice.



# THEORY OF CHANGE

CHANGE THE NARRATIVE,  
CHANGE THE WORLD.

## THE STORY IS THE SPARK.

PoP focuses on storytelling and influencing the advocacy ecosystem rather than advancing particular policy outcomes.

We put first-hand narratives at the core of our work. This allows people to truly show up, openly and honestly, knowing there is no underlying agenda for how stories are used.

We share the raw, unfiltered truth about their experiences, countering white-washed media narratives that have failed to name root causes of environmental injustice like colonization, exploitative capitalism, and racial and socioeconomic oppression.

Creating space for these stories to flourish will yield its own benefit.

## AMPLIFICATION IS IMPACT.

Cultural and societal change happens at the level of mass communications. The greatest impact happens at the pop culture level. Which is why we use viral media tactics and grassroots community building to share content and deepen connections so stories spread rapidly and widely across various media platforms.

By mainstreaming the stories from the frontlines of extraction and environmental racism, we empower new audiences across geographies and generations to understand and fight for Environmental Justice.



Participants at People over Plastic's collaboration with Hip Hop for Change for their 6th Annual Environmental Justice Summit.



# IMPACT



In 2023, People over Plastic continued our focus on serving frontline leaders in sharing their stories and solutions by hiring our first staff journalist Alexis Young.

### TELLING THE TRUE STORY ABOUT PETROCHEMICALS AND PLASTIC POLLUTION IN THE GULF SOUTH

With Alexis at the helm, we produced **30 stories** uplifting first-person narratives and centering Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic community organizers in Texas and Louisiana.

These stories have been ethically repurposed for our digital media platforms, including Instagram, Tiktok and YouTube, and republished on partner platforms.

# REPORTING

PEOPLE  
OVER  
PLASTIC





Thank you so much for just being real, covering the real stories on the ground. You know, the **real frontline people, telling our real stories.** Whenever we can relate to the person that's doing the interview, it makes it so much more fun and so much easier to talk about it. It doesn't feel like an interview, it feels like I'm talking to a family member who understands what we're going through. So thank you just for being here.

**ROISHETTA SIBLEY OZANE,**  
Founder of The Vessel Project of Louisiana



On set for our podcast series. From left to right:  
Francisco Núñez Capriles, Shilpi Chhotray, Ken Houston

Our internationally recognized podcast is a safe space for activists, changemakers, organizers, and innovators to hold raw, unfiltered conversations.

### SEASONS 1-3: FROM GLOBAL WASTE MAFIA TO THE GULF SOUTH

The podcast launched in October 2021 with Co-Founder and Host Shilpi Chhotray, featuring powerful voices in the global effort to fight back against plastic pollution. Our first season set the stage for a robust multi-season dialogue on plastic pollution and Environmental Justice.

We spoke about the power of art to impact change with activist Von Wong. In our conversation with Zero Grocery Founder, Zuleyka Strasner and Ritesh Andre, whose great grandfather founded Mumbai's famous Dabbawalas network, we decolonized mainstream thinking about zero waste—which actually started thousands of years ago. We also spoke with Filipino activist Froilan Grate of GAIA Asia Pacific about the need for people of color to have a seat at the decision making table. And we learned from our Co-Founder Patrice Simms, that if you aren't at the table, you're on the menu.

Since launching, we've produced four seasons and covered the underground world of the global waste trade, the fight against Cop City in Atlanta, as well as personal stories from U.S. communities most impacted by climate change, plastic pollution, and environmental injustice.

### LAST SEASON

In 2023, we turned all eyes to the Gulf South, one of America's most vulnerable regions. We had candid conversations with some of the most influential activists and community organizers who are resisting (and winning!) against Big Oil and Plastic.

Co-host and PoP Environmental Journalist, Alexis Young, illustrated faith, community, and Black women's role in advocating for protection and environmental justice. This season also featured Dr. Beverly Wright and Dr. Robert Bullard. These two Environmental Justice icons discussed their work in the Gulf Coast over the last 30 years, their progress, and the challenges Black communities are experiencing today.

**RAW, OPEN, HONEST DIALOGUE  
IS NOT EASILY REPLICATED**

# PODCAST



# CHART TOPPING

★★★★★

TOP10

RANKED IN SPOTIFY SOCIETY AND CULTURE

GUESTS

SEASON 1

Yvette Arellano, Fenceline Watch  
Ritesh Andre, Mumbai Dabbawala  
Tricia Cortez, Rio Grande International Study Center  
Froilan Grate, GAIA Asia Pacific  
Von Hernandez, Break Free From Plastic  
Sharon Lavigne, Rise St. James  
Tiza Mafira, Indonesia Plastic Bag Diet Movement  
Gloria Majiga-Kamoto, Centre for Environmental Policy and Advocacy  
Frankie Orona, Society of Native Nations  
Zuleyka Sanders, Zero Grocery  
Shilo Shiv Suleman, Fearless Collective  
Patrice Simms, EarthJustice and People over Plastic  
Von Wong, Artist

SEASON 2

Shashawnda Campbell, South Baltimore Community Land Trust  
Marcela Godoy, ADC Circular  
Ken Houston, Oakland Beautification Council  
Pierre Simmons, Sure We Can  
John Simons, Filipino Customs Official



SEASON 3

Sharon and Shamyra Lavigne, Rise St. James  
Bernadette Demientieff, Gwich'in Steering Committee  
Dr. Jacqueline Echols, South River Watershed Alliance  
David Heppard, Freedom Project Washington  
Josh Mori, Iwikua

SEASON 4

Yvette Arellano, Fenceline Watch  
Dr. Joy Banner, The Descendants Project  
Destiny Barnes, Louisiana Green Corps  
Dr. Robert Bullard, Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice  
Josette Cruz, Community Organizer in Brownsville, Texas  
Wawa Gatheru, Black Girl Environmentalist  
Bekah Hinojosa, Brownsville Community Activist  
Dr. Denae King, Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice  
Shamyra Lavigne, Rise St. James  
Michael McKenzie, Taproot Earth  
Frankie Orona, Society of Native Nations  
Roishetta Sibley Ozane, The Vessel Project of Louisiana  
Sunni Patterson, Activist and Poet  
Diane Wilson, Gulf Coast Activist  
Dr. Beverly Wright, The Deep South Center for Environmental Justice





I feel heard and seen through these podcast conversations and am learning so much through the guests. It definitely left me **feeling motivated, and empowered** with knowledge to discuss these topics with others.

## THE SANDY LION

Teacher, Author, Creative





CHART  
TOPPING

34  
COUNTRIES REACHED



“

PoP fills a critical gap when it comes to informing through storytelling. It covers the widespread destruction of **plastic pollution along multiple channels, and nothing else is approaching this issue from a lifecycle vantage point.** PoP details the physical and epidemiological impacts of plastic, but also covers a social and cultural dimension that is fascinating.

”

**SARA COLANGELO,**

Director of Georgetown's Environmental Law &amp; Justice Clinic





Sunni Patterson speaks at PoP's Story Salon Honoring Black Women in Environmental Justice at Essence Festival.

**WE PROVIDE A SAFE SPACE FOR  
INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND  
PEOPLE OF COLOR TO SHARE THEIR  
STORIES OF JOY AND RESILIENCE.**

# STORY SALONS

**PEOPLE  
OVER  
PLASTIC**

More than two-thousand people have attended our live storytelling events. In 2023, we produced three impactful events:

## FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AS A PATHWAY TO CLIMATE JUSTICE

*SHACK15 in San Francisco, CA — unceded Ohlone land*

A year after their inaugural story salon at SHACK15, People over Plastic brought together Indigenous organizers Josh Mori and Sara Moncada to shared their unique perspectives on food sovereignty as a pathway toward climate justice including indigenous-led solutions to heal and restore the land.

## HONORING BLACK WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

*Essence Festival at Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, LA — Bulbancha, meaning 'place some other tongues' is home to Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana, Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, Jena Band of Choctaw, Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana, Adai Caddo Indians of Louisiana, Bayou Lafourche Band of Biloxi-Chitimacha, Confederation of Muskogees, Choctaw-Apache Tribe of Ebarb, Clifton Choctaw Tribe of Louisiana, Four Winds Cherokee, Grand Caillou/Dulac Band of Biloxi Chitimacha Choctaw, Jean Charles Choctaw Nation, Louisiana Band of Choctaw, Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana, Pointe-au Chien-Indian Tribe, United Houma Nation.*

The discussion centered on the ways the petrochemical and petroleum industry has long exploited historic inequities in Louisiana and how frontline communities remain resilient in the face of these struggles.

## STORYTELLERS:

**Dr. Joy Banner and Jo Banner**, The Descendants Project  
**Wawa Gatheru**, Black Girl Environmentalist  
**Shamyra Lavigne**, Rise St. James  
**Sunni Patterson**, Activist & Poet  
**Roishetta Sibely Ozane**, The Vessel Project  
**Dr. Beverly Wright**, Deep South Center for Environmental Justice

## POP PODCAST LIVE

*The Bullard Center, Houston, TX — the ancestral land of the Karankawa, the Atakapa, and the Akokisas people*

People over Plastic hosted a live podcast session at The Bullard Center at Texas Southern University (TSU). We discussed community-based solutions to reduce petrochemical pollution and uplift Environmental Justice.

## PARTICIPANTS:

**Alexis Young**, People over Plastic  
**Patrice Simms**, People over Plastic  
**Ryan Jeter**, HBCU Liaison for Environmental Defense Fund  
**Dr. Denae W. King**, The Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice  
**Michael McKenzie**, Former Regional Organizer for Gulf South for a Green New Deal and Taproot Earth



“

When it comes to media, we have been burned, our narrative has been changed after the fact. We want to keep the stories straight up. I went into PoP's storytelling event trusting it. As long as you keep telling the narrative from the raw grassroots, I think you can't go wrong. **The stories are powerful. The connections are powerful.**

”

**FRANKIE ORONA,**

Executive Director of Society of Native Nations, Advisor at People over Plastic



METRICS

800+

Mission Aligned Posts

42%+

Community Growth

WE UPLIFT FRONTLINE LEADERS,  
THEIR STORIES, AND AMPLIFY  
THEIR CALLS-TO-ACTION.

SOCIAL  
MEDIA

In 2023, we grew our reach, community,  
launched People over Plastic on TikTok,  
and piloted our influencer newsroom with  
content from Mary Black and Alexis Young.

KEY TOPICS EXPLORED

Plastic & Petrochemicals

Indigenous Activism Against False Solutions

Cop City & Abolitionist Movements Organizing

Food Sovereignty

Water Rights

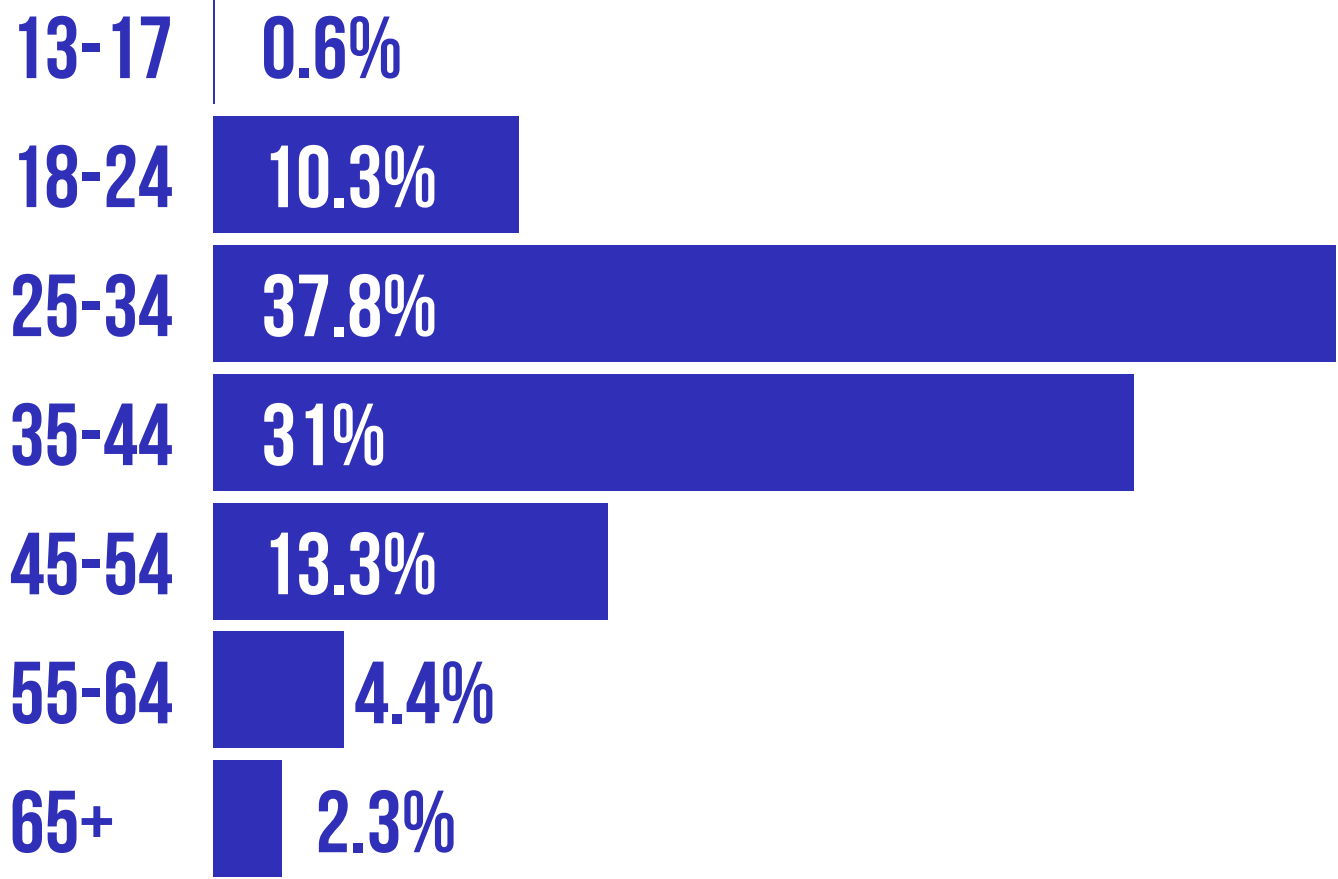
Housing Justice

Climate Gentrification

Community Activism

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age





I feel seen!

Great video! Plastic is an environmental, health, and social justice issue. Thanks for highlighting how broadly plastic impacts communities and not just the ocean and wildlife.

You, your work and storytelling is what I needed as a little girl growing up in Rutherford.

Thanks as always for your work 🔥 I love to see all the new leaders stepping up.

Everything 🙌

This video is rekindling my environmental spirit!  
Thank you so much 🙌❤️❤️

# COMMENTS





# THE MARGIN

## THE MARGIN

We were thrilled to announce The Margin – an award-winning Environmental Justice publication – is now a special project housed at People over Plastic. We joined forces because of our shared pursuit for Environmental Justice through bold journalism and compelling storytelling.

Founded by Bryce Cracknell, a writer, filmmaker, and activist, The Margin amplifies the voices of those most affected by environmental injustice. Our stories delve into the insidious cycles marginalizing communities, offering a vital perspective on the intersection of social and environmental issues.

In 2022, during the 40th Anniversary of the Environmental Justice movement, The Margin published its first issue, which was recognized by The Nation magazine and earned two Anthem Awards in Sustainability, Environment & Climate.

## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATION

Founded by abolitionists in 1865, The Nation has long believed that independent journalism has the capacity to bring about a more democratic and equitable world. They've committed to republishing the second edition of The Margin, slated for Fall 2024 to its more than 90 thousand subscribers.

**Stay tuned!**



# FUNDING VALUES



PoP's Fundraising Charter guides our development and partnership efforts to ensure mission and vision alignment.

### OUR BELIEFS

- Fundraising and relationship building are interwoven.
- Funding should benefit frontline communities without red tape.
- Funding should be decolonized.
- Frontline communities are the experts on injustices and carry the solutions to environmental injustices.

While philanthropy's climate funding only serves 1.3% of BIPOC-led climate organizations, funding sources we will never take from include:

- Oil and gas companies and other extractive industries
- Single-use plastic producers including bioplastic, recycled plastic, or upcycled plastic brands

# FUNDING VALUES

### KEY FUNDING PARTNERS

**Bloomberg  
Philanthropies**

THE **JTB** FOUNDATION

**climateworks  
FOUNDATION**

**tides**



**11th Hour Project**  
The Schmidt Family Foundation

**PARK  
FOUNDATION**



**PLASTIC  
SOLUTIONS  
FUND**

**Google.org**



# LOOKING FORWARD





# LETTER FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When we think of traditional media, what comes to mind are mainstream narratives that dominate airwaves, soundwaves, and social media platforms. These narratives are often driven by forces that do not include the voices, perceptions, or histories of people of color.

This sentiment is evident in a study conducted by The Pew Research Center that found a significant percentage of Black Americans responded that mainstream media does not represent them and mainstream media practices are rooted in a long history of misrepresentation, stereotyping, and underrepresentation (Pew, 2022).

At PoP, we accept this challenge to ensure media is rooted in facts and authentic representation.

I am energized by PoP's mission, and what we stand for. People over Plastic is Media for Environmental Justice. This means that my story of growing up in a fenceline community in North Baton Rouge—where Exxon tankers and toxic plumes from incinerators blocked the sunlight—matters. This also means that what matters are the stories, fights, hopes, resistance, and wins of people on the margins of extraction across the Gulf South to Appalachia.

As an urban educator, environmental justice advocate, social-entrepreneur, and community engagement strategist, I believe apathy decreases when participation increases. These non-negotiable beliefs align with PoP's actional values to: decolonize narratives, pass the mic, and meet people where they are.

The importance of these values cannot be understated.

In partnership with Environmental Justice leaders and advocates, PoP is poised to launch Solidarity Rides that will collectivize and amplify frontline voices, and proliferate counter-narratives in a culturally responsive and authentic way. Solidarity Rides are inspired by Freedom Rides of the past. When I coined the term 'Solidarity Rides' along with the support of EJ leaders in Texas, the thought was: We will not tour Black and Brown communities and call them "toxic," but instead bring EJ leaders together in solidarity as to collectivize their voices and uplift their strategies to achieve Environmental Justice.

Looking ahead, we are amped about our 'PoP Media & Solidarity Rides for Environmental Justice.' With Solidarity Rides as the literal vehicle, one can also expect compelling mini-documentaries, thought-provoking webinars, Story Salons, PoP E-zine, PoP Podcasts, and multimedia that is true to our mission and vision. Additionally, our team is excited to expand to data projects that support frontline groups and bolster storytelling through our recent acquisition of The Margin.

Peace & Movement,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MMK'.

Michael McKenzie,  
Executive Director, People over Plastic



CHANGE THE NARRATIVE,  
CHANGE THE WORLD.