

# BUILDING BRIDGES

## Through the Arts, Media and Humanities

January 2025





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# Foreword

## A Letter from DDF, NEA and NEH Leadership

The arts, media and humanities are core to the human experience. When we revisit the history of the oral tradition, the beginning of the written word, or the origins of music and dance — the arts, media and humanities have always enabled civilizations to document collective and individual histories. Perhaps most importantly, these sectors have maintained a legacy of fulfilling the innate human desire for connection, belonging and curiosity. In addition to creating spaces for comfort and refuge, the arts, media and humanities act as remedies in moments of dissension and conflict. In times of distress and strife, people of all cultures often turn to imaginative storytellers for solace and to make meaning of the world around them.

In recent memory, those in the United States have had to face several moments of intense dissension and have had to confront their role in these situations. Those include recovering from a global pandemic, grappling with radicalization and navigating global conflicts that are creating divisions within and between communities. These moments and others have, at times, led to intolerance and hate-fueled violence toward marginalized groups in the country, particularly those encompassing race, gender and religion. Today more than ever, supporters and practitioners of the arts, media and humanities have the opportunity to unite and think innovatively to deepen the impact their work has on addressing these critical issues — to build bridges and transform hate into cross-community cooperation.



Photo: Leslye Davis

**“Ideas drive history. We’re a species of concepts and those [ideas] shape us. The soil of ideas is culture.”**

-Sam Gill

*President and CEO, Doris Duke Foundation*

We define **building bridges** as a path for promoting connection, empowering acceptance and building understanding between communities that may otherwise not have opportunities for meaningful interaction. Projects and initiatives with the purpose of bridge-building for inclusivity and social cohesion can improve the wellbeing of diverse populations and contribute to building stronger, inclusive communities.

The work of building bridges across different communities is not new, and the need for bridge-building persists and must be addressed with creative strategies. Our organizations have joined forces to ensure that messages from arts, media and humanities practitioners advocating for a pluralistic society can endure political and institutional change and continue to work towards connection, acceptance and understanding for all in the United States. We urge you to join us in this mission.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) have been unwavering in their commitment to addressing hate and strengthening civic infrastructure. Both agencies have invested in a range of efforts that address trauma and healing. Included among these is their launch in 2022 of the *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture* initiative. The collaborative effort leverages the arts and humanities to promote civic engagement, inclusivity, social cohesion and cross-cultural understanding. A key philanthropic funder engaged in similar efforts, the Doris Duke Foundation (DDF) has a natural alignment as a partner with the NEA and NEH. An important catalyst for this partnership was a groundbreaking Summit, cohosted by the NEA and the White House, called “Healing, Bridging, Thriving: The Arts and Culture in Our Communities,” outlining a comprehensive vision in which cultural organizations and practitioners contribute to the health and well-being of individual and communities, invigorate physical spaces, fuel democracy and foster equitable outcomes

A subsequent result of this partnership was a convening that took place in New York City on November 8, 2024. It brought together 40 leading creative thinkers, community leaders and advocates working on bridge-building projects across the arts, media and humanities. The purpose of this convening was to promote knowledge exchange and foster collaboration, identify emerging themes across the field of bridge-building and expand on existing approaches by articulating a shared vision for the change they can bring about through their work. This report not only captures the themes, lessons and ideas from the convening, offering

a snapshot of the bridge-building field in this evolving moment; it also attempts to capture the energy and hope present among these 40 participants in response to a shifting environment, highlighting tried and true approaches and innovative methods being utilized on the ground.

At our November convening, we celebrated the ways grantee and affiliate efforts have shifted culture and how they will continue to play a critical role in expressing our humanity and values, bringing people together and fueling understanding, acceptance and connection. There has been a rising focus on the impact that arts, media and humanities have on the U.S. economy. But now, there is also a growing understanding of the role that the arts, media and humanities play in improving the health and wellbeing of communities. These sectors are also foundational to effectively bridging societal differences and fueling our country's democracy.

We were inspired by the energy in the room at November's event as we witnessed storied institutions and cutting-edge practitioners alike declare a readiness and commitment to lead work that ensures this country is a place where everyone belongs, is respected and accepted, regardless of their identity or circumstance.

We know that there is not one single approach to creating an inclusive and cohesive nation. We recognize that our country needs diverse solutions for this culture change to endure. To make a meaningful difference, we have to shift from being reactionary to preempting division and inculcating values of understanding and respect. We also know we do not have all the answers now, but one thing is clear: We all have something to contribute from our respective platforms and we know that we can and will go further when we do this work collectively.

As we all continue this important work, we encourage everyone to:

- **BE CURIOUS.** Lead with questions. We cannot have connection and understanding without wanting to learn more.
- **BUILD ON WHAT IS THERE.** Just as we have inherited work and built on it, steward work that will be passed onto others. In the process, involve and work with youth who will eventually take up the baton.
- **CELEBRATE.** Celebrate the beauty of cultures and celebrate our rich differences. Take a moment to look back and celebrate our progress while keeping our eyes on the longer-term vision.
- Finally, **DO NOT STOP.** This is a long game, and we must persevere and remain agile to do this work to strengthen the cultural foundation of our democracy and the communities where we all will thrive.

We invite fellow public agencies, philanthropic funders, institutions and practitioners to join us in committing to elevating support for the arts, media and humanities. To stay united for a shared vision, we call on you to think about how you, your organization and your work can contribute to attaining and sustaining a level of inclusivity and cohesion that respects differences in our society, embraces points of connection between us and ensures a safe, welcoming and nurturing environment for those who will come after us.

**Samsher (Sam) Singh Gill**

*President and CEO, Doris Duke Foundation*

**Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD**

*Chair, National Endowment for the Arts*

**Shelly C. Lowe (Navajo)**

*Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities*



# Section I

## Meeting the Moment - Using Arts, Media & Humanities to Strengthen Inclusivity and Social Cohesion

Much of today's public discourse is fractured and algorithmically driven, dividing communities through polarizing messaging, misinformation and artificial echo chambers. The sheer volume of rapidly available, hyper-targeted content has contributed to deepening divisions across political and values spectrums. Additionally, this rise of online spaces has occurred while the availability and use of physical community spaces is in decline.

Societal changes continue to bring uncertainty around how content may be received, resulting in concerns that asking questions or sharing thoughts may lead to judgement or that featuring someone from an extreme end of the ideological spectrum may alienate people or halt conversation.

As people aim to absorb and make sense of domestic and global current affairs, this content too often leads to rising intolerance, hate and violence — particularly against a range of racial, ethnic, gender and religious-based groups living in the U.S.

**Through curiosity, intentional listening and creative mediums, the arts, media and humanities promote connection, acceptance and understanding.** Field practitioners can serve to encourage communities across the country to recognize perspectives different from their own.<sup>1</sup>

**“How do we stay hopeful and strategic? How do we get through this moment and thrive? How do we use our imagination and stay bound together as a network?”**

-Zeyba Rahman

*Director of the Building Bridges Program,  
Doris Duke Foundation*

<sup>1</sup> This report defines “practitioners” as individuals or institutions implementing or advancing arts, media and humanities work on the ground, creating content or experiences that build bridges. For example, musicians, film producers, actors, playwrights and scholars.

To do this work, practitioners rely on sustained investments from current funders. At this moment, there is an opportunity for new funders to invest in creative bridge-building strategies.

On November 8, 2024, the Doris Duke Foundation (DDF), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) held a half-day convening for 40 DDF, NEA and NEH grantees and affiliates working across creative mediums. Together, participants identified emerging themes across a wide range of efforts aimed at bridge-building and shared existing approaches and best practices to address needs on the ground.<sup>2</sup> They also shared their visions to bring about cultural change and promote shared understanding, acceptance and connection.

**This report captures participants' perspectives and insights from the November convening, by:**

- 1. Showcasing the impact the arts, media and humanities can have** in strengthening inclusivity and social cohesion.
- 2. Sharing recent bridge-building field trends and strategies** that can be used to continue paths forward.
- 3. Outlining needs and recommendations shared by** bridge-building practitioners to sustain and catalyze impactful work.

We hope that this report encourages community- and democracy-focused funders and policymakers to understand the arts, media and humanities as effective bridge-building assets; provides ideas for arts and culture funders who want to deepen their impact and investments in the bridge-building field; and helps enable artists and humanities practitioners to learn from their peers.

**“The goodwill, talent, energy and creativity is there in abundance, but more good thinking is needed on whom organizations want to build bridges to, and what the techniques, platforms, channels and spaces are where that can happen.”**

-Max Rudin

*President and Publisher, Library of America*

<sup>2</sup> This report defines the bridge-building field as a collective of practitioners who promote connection, enable acceptance and cultivate understanding between communities that may otherwise not have much meaningful interaction. This work is being done by practitioners both independently and in partnership with others.

# Section II

## Understanding the Bridge-Building Field - A Practitioner Lens

### Key Themes Facing the Bridge-Building Field

At the November convening, practitioners named a few core challenges and themes they face as they undertake the work:

- 1. Sharper definition of the work** - Bridge-building is often defined by the field as efforts that promote connection, enable acceptance and cultivate understanding between communities that may otherwise not have much meaningful interaction. Practitioners feel that there might be an opportunity to create a more universal, shared understanding of bridge-building and the efforts it entails. The field is also considering how they might employ more easily understood, accessible language to expand the bounds of who considers themselves a bridge builder. By creating clearer, accessible and more universal language, the bridge-building field may be able to invite new ideas about how arts, media and humanities projects can foster connection.
- 2. Tension between grassroots and scale** - Practitioners have reflected on the idea that social change can be catalyzed from both a “bottom-up” approach starting at the community level and from a “top-down” approach starting at the national level. For instance, a nationwide exhibit or mainstream film debut may have wide reach, but the audience may be like-minded and only reach a handful of new people. Practitioners also acknowledge that at both levels, culture change may happen in smaller spaces, which requires a targeted, long-term effort. This spectrum of approaches offers an opportunity for practitioners to think about how definitions of success may differ by project. For some, it might be widespread reach and knowledge dissemination. For others, it may be creating access to certain communities and influencing local culture.
- 3. Lack of or decline in community spaces** - The lack of or decline of public and third spaces, defined as those distinct from home or work, leaves a gap in opportunities to develop community and foster connections. In rural areas, there may not be an abundance of third spaces. Additionally, in general, houses of worship and institutionalized religion are facing a decline in engagement among youth and many community spaces remain underutilized. In the wake of these challenges, practitioners are grappling with how to meet communities where they are, how to create spaces for learning and whether/how these spaces can be created, preserved or recommissioned.



## The Impact of Bridge-Building Work

Practitioners believe that bridge-building efforts can be foundational to changing culture and strengthening cooperation between communities across the United States. At the November convening, practitioners discussed their intended impacts and the impact they see in communities. They see their work achieving these outcomes through the key abilities below:

**“We need to work toward stating better what we do and why we do it.”**

-Donald Young  
Director of Programs,  
Center for Asian American Media

1. **Bringing people together** - Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has declared that we are living in another epidemic of isolation and loneliness.<sup>3</sup> At the “Healing, Bridging, Thriving” Summit co-hosted by the NEA and the White House, the Surgeon General named the arts and humanities as remedies to this loneliness epidemic, saying “the arts are medicine, and the arts are a source of healing, and that’s why they deserve prioritization and the investment of our country.” This theme, and the Surgeon General’s affirmation, was

discussed at the November 8 convening. In a moment when many people across the country feel increasingly lonely or isolated, the arts, media and humanities can bring people together. Projects in this space create open invitations for individuals to humanize each other by going deeper and seeing beyond the surface.



**Roadside Theater** is a professional ensemble of grassroots storytellers, musicians, and theater makers from the central Appalachian coalfields. Since 1975, the theater has worked in thousands of communities across the country, making it possible for ordinary people to share stories, discover common ground to build community wealth and power together.

Story circle at the Arch Social Club in West Baltimore with Roadside Theater ensemble members and community leaders from Baltimore; Uniontown, Alabama; Letcher County, Kentucky; and Milwaukee and Sauk County, Wisconsin. Photo: Adam Carr.

2. **Nurturing curiosity** - The arts, media and humanities are vehicles for sharing different perspectives and stories. They showcase different ways of living, thinking and doing. As a result, these sectors create important spaces for people to reflect and ask questions about experiences that are new and different from their own.
3. **Meeting people where they are** - Bridge-building has no prerequisites for engagement. This means that practitioners are able to customize their work and projects to specific communities. This can include an array of approaches, such as choosing whether to make content available physically in local contexts or online, and choosing mediums that people are familiar with. It can also mean making content and language more familiar, creating a low barrier to entry that makes new concepts intellectually and emotionally accessible.

**Race Forward** is a nonprofit racial justice organization that provides resources and tools for communities and public institutions to achieve a just multiracial democratic society in which communities win governing power, institutions are transformed and better equipped to advance racial justice and cross-sector institutions collaborate for effective and sustainable change. Race Forward aims to meet people where they are through its award-winning multimedia platform, **Colorlines**, which provides accessible and impactful storytelling that centers impacted people and uplifts prodemocracy narratives to advance racial justice.

4. **Expanding viewpoints** - Many social media algorithms are designed to compel users to spend as much time as possible in a given app.<sup>4</sup> A key way to achieve this is by showing users content they already agree with. This approach condenses, rather than expands, what people experience online. Bridge-building projects can give the public a chance to pause and expand their worldview, creating opportunities to hold complexity and nuance in ways that much of the digital experience does not.

**“I feel most gratified when I am challenged in my opinions, but can use that learning to change course.”**

-Sara Ogger  
*Executive Director, Humanities New York*

**Stranger at the Gate**, a 2022 documentary directed by Joshua Seftel and produced by Smartypants Pictures, features a Muslim-American protagonist who becomes the hero of the story. Media personality Joe Rogan, who is known for his top-ranking Spotify podcast, spoke enthusiastically about the film and its protagonist multiple times on his platform. Rogan’s podcast skews generally more conservative and his 14.5 million Spotify followers are composed of a largely male audience. Because of this, filmmakers saw Rogan’s mentions as a great win in achieving their goals of reaching beyond the usual echo chamber. They also faced some pushback from allies when emphasizing or sharing Joe Rogan’s positive reception to the film due to his polarizing nature.



**“Expansive storytelling moves us beyond inclusive storytelling. Rather than trying to fit stories narrowly into an already existing frame, it asks us to expand our frame and reveal the stories that have always been here.”**

-Zaheer Ali

*Executive Producer, American Muslims: A History Revealed*

Photo: Timestamp Media

5. **Building trust through truth** - Bridge-building projects offer an opportunity to provide authentic, truthful accounts of communities, serving as a rebuttal to frequently arising mis- and dis-information. This is especially true when practitioners offer space for creative interpretation and yield autonomy to participants themselves. This intimate work has developed trust between communities who interact with storytelling as a cultural practice.
6. **Highlighting the diversity of communities by telling untold stories** - Many practitioners mentioned the importance of sharing compelling stories that showcase a wide variety of lived experiences and cultures. This theme also introduces society to stories they might not have heard otherwise and helps to foster greater inclusion. By seeking out untold stories, practitioners create more space for diversity of thought and experience.

**“The arts help us to ‘see beyond one’s own front door’ and care about broader ideas and thinking.”**

-Leila Abu-Saada

*Building Bridges Documentary Fund,  
Manager, Center for Asian American Media*





## American Muslims: A History Revealed

Few people recognize that the story of U.S. Muslims begins long before the nation was founded. Through a series of six 20-minute films, *American Muslims: A History Revealed* aims to strengthen public understanding of the U.S. Muslim experience by connecting Muslim stories to broader moments across U.S. history and contemporary contexts. *American Muslims* is being distributed by PBS across its digital platforms (app, website and flagship YouTube channel) and is designed to appeal to a wide range of audiences. The episodes were produced by Maytha Alhassen, Zaheer Ali and Graham Judd with support from the Doris Duke Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Mellon Foundation and the Pillars Fund. Engagement activities are funded by the Doris Duke Foundation and the Pop Culture Collaborative.

Photo: Timestamp Media

7. **Translating ideas between groups** - Many practitioners help to translate information between communities both literally and figuratively, helping to bind two groups closer together across social differences. Practitioners have found that while it is challenging, this iterative work helps groups understand one another by providing accurate portrayals of lived experiences, values and ideas. Practitioners have seen this work result in more authentic allyship that can lead to cross-community advocacy efforts for common issues.

**“It’s hard to refute people’s lived experiences in stories.”**

-Farhan Latif  
President, El-Hibri Foundation

# Section III

## Building a Path Forward - Strategies and Trends to Explore

In addition to discussing the impact of their work, participants at the November convening discussed ways forward for practitioners and for the bridge-building field more broadly. They highlighted strategies that have proven to be successful, discussed the conditions and mindsets needed for this work to persist and thrive and lifted up critical challenges, tensions and outstanding questions that they grapple with in their work every day. This section explores each of those topics.

### Successful Strategies

There are a number of clear and tested strategies that practitioners use to build bridges across their communities. While this list is not exhaustive, some of those strategies are documented below.

#### Where to Engage

Practitioners shared location- and place-based strategies that have helped engage individuals and communities with intention.

1. **Work at smaller, local scales to foster effective, replicable outcomes** -

Several participants spoke of “depth over breadth” when it comes to project concept and design, emphasizing that working locally in community contexts fosters productive and important social bonds that strengthen community connections. By working at a smaller scale, practitioners can have more intimate conversations that help people and communities connect to and understand one another more closely, regardless of whether they share similar or diverging characteristics and experiences. Working at a smaller scale also allows local experiences to be adapted to other local contexts, leading to cultivation of community-centered local power.

### Humanities New York’s

**Post-Incarceration Humanities Partnership**, supports a number of nonprofit organizations serving individuals who have been previously incarcerated, and in some cases, their families. Using humanities tools, Humanities New York helps citizens strengthen relationships, rebuild their lives and ultimately strengthen communities and democracy.

In 2024, 20 organizations led programs in their respective communities after **receiving \$474,428** in funding support from Humanities New York. Programming activities include the development of journals of prose and poetry, podcasts between formerly incarcerated people and their families, and a series of short films focused on justice-involved youth.



- 2. Practice with spaces that have the potential to draw people together** - Practitioners can think about strategic places to promote their work. “Third spaces” are formal or informal locations, distinct from home and work; they serve as hubs and offer the opportunity for people to connect socially, learn together and, in the process, find community. These can include libraries, municipalities, places of worship or community centers. Convening participants emphasized the power of partnering with third spaces and noted the importance of ensuring that partnerships don’t stop after one-off engagements. Instead, these strategic partnerships must be positioned to be enduring and sustainable. Frequently mentioned partners include:

**Libraries** - Often located in population centers, libraries bring together diverse populations living in close proximity. Libraries often have a good sense of community needs and work to address them. Many libraries have worked with bridge-building practitioners to host events and programs that deepen community knowledge and address community needs.



### Muslims in Brooklyn Project

directed by Zaheer Ali for Brooklyn Historical Society (now Center for Brooklyn History) – was a public arts and history project that ran from 2017–2019. The project included a collection of 54 oral histories. To help create points of entry for the oral history archive, the team created a series of public programs, including listening parties with libraries. Over the course of six months, the project hosted twelve listening parties with libraries and other cultural sites throughout Brooklyn. Clips from the archive were curated by themes and framed around questions, with the goal of fostering intergenerational, intercultural conversation.

The project also included a curriculum that lives on today and continues to be accessed by educators and teachers.

**Educational institutions** - Early childhood, K-12 and postsecondary institutions regularly host practitioners in their classrooms and in extracurricular programming.

**Monument Lab** is a nonprofit public art, history and design studio in Philadelphia that reimagines monuments as places for belonging, learning and healing. Monument Lab has produced the **National Monument Audit** in partnership with the Mellon Foundation to better understand the dynamics and trends that have shaped our national monument landscape, pose questions and prompt reflection on common knowledge and public memory.

As part of their work with educational institutions, Monument Lab produced the **You're Welcome** exhibition in partnership with artist Cannupa Hanska Luger, the University of Michigan Museum of Art, and the University of Michigan Arts Initiative. The exhibition encouraged visitors to consider how the University of Michigan campus is remembered and experienced – prompting larger reflections about the relationship between architecture, history, and memory. Monument Lab has worked in partnership with Bryn Mawr College on a five-year **ARCH Project** (Art Remediating Campus Histories), including the forthcoming dedication of Nekisha Durrett's legacy monument, "Don't Forget to Remember (Me)" to address a legacy of exclusionary practices at the College. This vital work builds on previous and ongoing College-supported efforts by students, staff, alums, and faculty to reveal and repair harm, ensuring a reckoning with Bryn Mawr College's history and a clear-sighted look at the way to a future of inclusion and reconciliation.

Monument Lab also co-founded the Center for Public Art & Space at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design to generate artistic research and civic engagement.



Photo: Craig Smith for Heard Museum, 2020. This Is Not A Snake / The One Who Checks & The One Who Balances, Cannupa Hanska Luger, 2017–2020.



**Religious spaces** - Houses of worship, across any religion, bring generations of people together to better understand their relationship to the world. As religious leaders explore their own faiths and promote interfaith dialogues, they can, and often do, draw from the arts, media and humanities in their work.

**The El-Hibri Foundation (EHF)** is a philanthropic organization that empowers and equips Muslim leaders and allies to build thriving, inclusive communities. EHF is committed to advancing the inclusion of and within American Muslim communities by investing resources in leaders and organizations who share a vision of a world in which all individuals, regardless of race, religion, or gender, have an opportunity to thrive.

As part of this commitment, EHF works with other philanthropies to support and host multi-faith networks that build relationships and promote pluralism in U.S.-based communities. These networks are built by convening people of diverse backgrounds, and by investing in leaders and organizations that believe stronger communities are built with mutual trust and collaboration.

The Foundation's capstone Public Narrative program is centered on advancing narrative change through collective trainings of U.S. Muslims and cross-sector, cross-community allies.



Photo: El-Hibri Foundation

3. **Partner with policymakers and government institutions** - Bridge-building efforts are shaped by the policy landscape in which they are produced. In turn, creative partnerships with policymakers, government institutions and local community ecosystems can engage decision-makers in discussions of how and why local, state and federal laws shape a community's dynamics. Partnerships with these entities, in addition to thoughtful engagement with them, can catalyze productive conversations and initiatives that are co-created by residents at all levels of government.

**Center for Cultural Power** activates and mobilizes BIPOC artists to envision a world where cultural, economic and political power are distributed equitably, and where all human beings can live in harmony with nature. This women of color, artist-led organization focuses on supporting artists, creating intersectional stories and fostering cultural strategy through partnership with organizations and practitioners.

Through their Movement Building programs across gender and health equity, climate justice, immigration and migration, civic engagement and racial justice topics, BIPOC artists and movement groups are able to advance narrative change by expanding the conversation, challenging assumptions and disrupting disinformation. The storytelling model also uniquely centers artists of diverse cultural backgrounds, sexual orientation, ability and immigration status to shine a light on voices often under or misrepresented.

Utilizing a place-based model, Cultural Power believes that by uplifting stories of love, joy and interdependence, artists lay the infrastructure for bridges of understanding and empathy to be erected. For instance, in 2024, Cultural Power partnered with local artists, cultural practitioners and grassroots organizations in Martin County, NC to: (1) inspire conversation and connection, (2) spark a commitment to civic engagement and (3) highlight the artist leaders who are using the power of their voice and their work to advance social and political movements. By bringing artists together with local business, farming communities and community leaders, including broadband providers, culture makers gained firsthand perspectives on the most pressing issues in their local ecosystems. The artwork commissioned through this powerful collaboration inspired brave conversations and alliances across issue areas such as technological empowerment, climate, gender autonomy, racial justice and economic inclusion. Their efforts culminated in two community events that attracted attention and attendance from local politicians, public health providers and educational institutions.

## How to Engage

Practitioners shared strategies rooted in methodology and practice that have helped them connect to and build bridges across communities. Practitioners emphasized the importance of allowing for curiosity, encouraging active listening and leveraging facilitated discussions to bring shared experiences to the forefront and increase understanding.

### A key engagement strategy involved project design:

Practitioners can drive toward bridge-building outcomes by incorporating a set of intentional questions about the communities they aim to work with into project design. Taking the time to think through community member considerations can help practitioners design projects that welcome audiences to engage thoughtfully. Some questions that practitioners ask to achieve more responsive and customizable projects include:

- What sort of messaging will resonate with this community?
- Has this community previously engaged with the themes I am going to present? If so, how and why have they previously engaged in these topics?
- Where will I be showcasing my content? How might I take the physical space where I am presenting my work into consideration? What sort of content is the space most conducive for? For example, a producer doing a film screening may consider the difference in audience engagement when hosting it in a classroom versus a film festival.
- How can I intentionally design community experiences that encourage dialogue or active engagement with my material?
- What are the conditions in which this content will be shared? For example, how long will we spend together?

**“Build a strong container,  
through setting clear guidelines  
and expectations, then let  
people share freely within it.”**

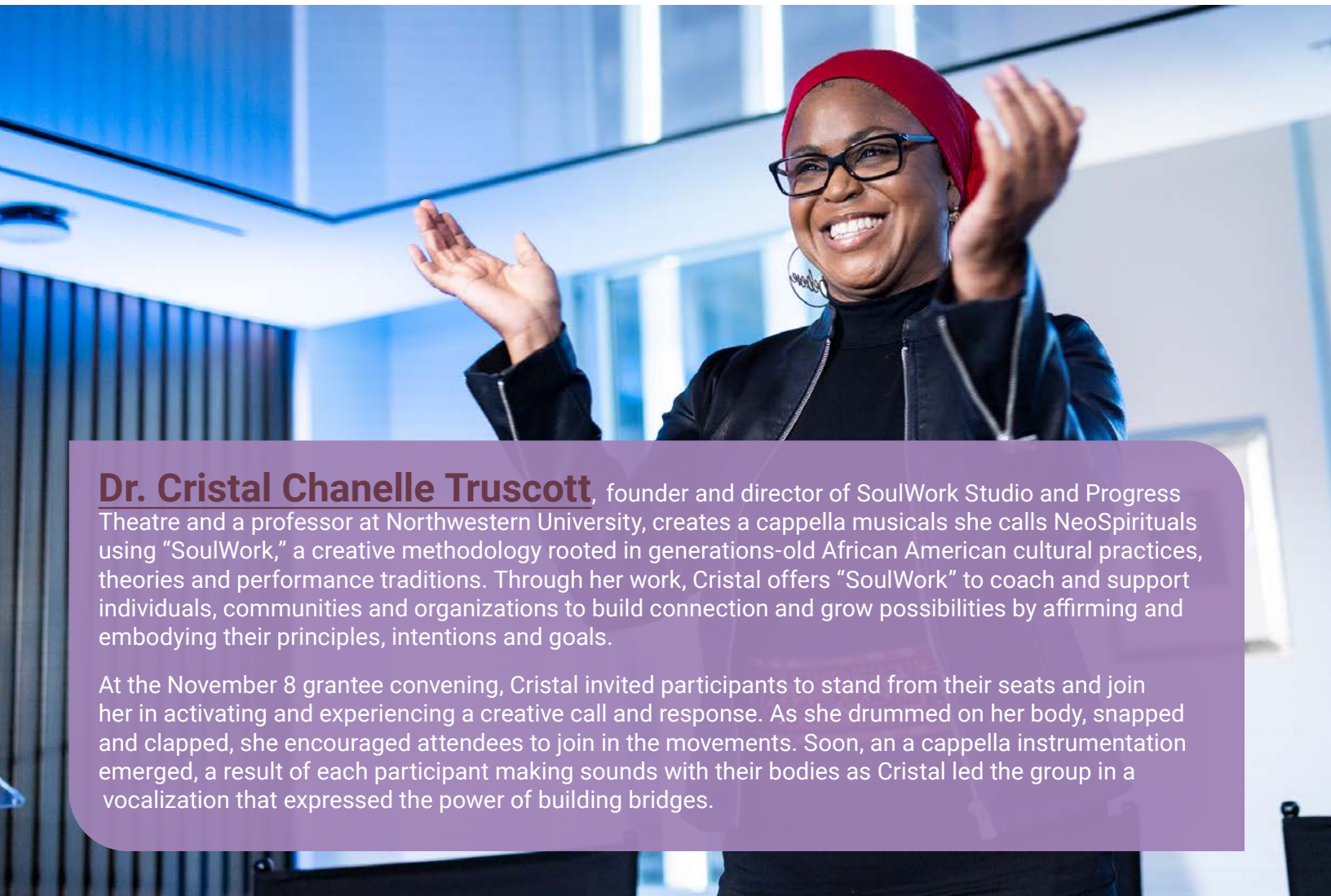
-Ben Fink

*General Editor, Art in a Democracy:  
Selected Plays of Roadside Theater*



**Other engagement strategies to consider:**

- *Listen thoughtfully and without judgement*
- *Utilize intentional, inclusive facilitation*
- *Set ground rules and allow for disagreement without judgement*
- *Allow participants to exercise their own creativity*
- *Work with underrepresented communities to tell stories on their own terms*
- *Seek to find connection across experiences*



**Dr. Cristal Chanelle Truscott**, founder and director of SoulWork Studio and Progress Theatre and a professor at Northwestern University, creates a cappella musicals she calls NeoSpirituals using “SoulWork,” a creative methodology rooted in generations-old African American cultural practices, theories and performance traditions. Through her work, Cristal offers “SoulWork” to coach and support individuals, communities and organizations to build connection and grow possibilities by affirming and embodying their principles, intentions and goals.

At the November 8 grantee convening, Cristal invited participants to stand from their seats and join her in activating and experiencing a creative call and response. As she drummed on her body, snapped and clapped, she encouraged attendees to join in the movements. Soon, an a cappella instrumentation emerged, a result of each participant making sounds with their bodies as Cristal led the group in a vocalization that expressed the power of building bridges.

## Conditions & Attitudes Needed

Translating these strategies into practice requires mindsets conducive to social cohesion and inclusivity. The conditions and attitudes listed below, shared by convening participants, inform what might be needed by bridge-building practitioners and supporters to achieve meaningful outcomes.

1. **Develop relationships and embrace the process** - Using the arts, media and humanities to build trust and relationships requires time and patience, and that trust may not immediately materialize. To build a deep and durable impact, practitioners would benefit from considering how the process of creating and disseminating content and stories can authentically lead to understanding, acceptance and connection, rather than solely focusing on the result.
2. **Listen and lead with an open mind** - A core tenet of work in this space is recognizing that everyone has a story. Practitioners must be able to reckon with the extent to which they are controlling narratives, particularly when the stories may be different from their own. Instead, practitioners can allow themselves to iterate and spend significant time working with those being depicted. By openly interacting with subjects, storytellers can ensure they are crafting an authentic and meaningful story.
3. **Hold respect for local knowledge and expertise** - In many instances, practitioners are not the experts, but rather, the conveyors of community knowledge. As such, convening attendees affirmed that practitioners would do well to lean on the experiences of the communities they engage and allow for their knowledge and preferences to shape the direction of their work.
4. **Consider the context** - Convening participants encouraged the bridge-building field to consider the broader conditions that have created existing social, political, or economic circumstances. Revisiting those questions as well as their own assumptions about them may help to invite new adjustments or approaches to practitioners' work.

**“How can we find possibility in whatever circumstances we’re in? How can we reframe circumstances to find the windows of opportunity?”**

-Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD  
*Chair, National Endowment for the Arts*

**Artists for Understanding**, a partnership between the White House, the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), **the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)** and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) promotes the arts and humanities as crucial in bridging divides through their capacity to foster dialogue, connection, empathy, and changemaking in communities. Through public forums, the initiative provides opportunities for broad engagement and increased awareness on the power of the arts and humanities to counter all forms of hate.

PCAH’s Senior Advisor and Envoy for Cultural Exchange, Carla Dirlikov Canales, spoke about her experience leading this initiative. She shared that the activities to date have gone a long way in building relationships and trust between people of varying backgrounds and from diverse cultural sectors. She also observed that through this work she has seen firsthand how the power of storytelling can help to foster understanding and build solidarity across divides.

5. **Maintain hope through changing environments** - Staying hopeful is an essential component of working in the arts, media and humanities. The work that practitioners do and the change they aim for is often long-term and intergenerational. It is crucial to continue the work, even if changes in communities are gradual or may seem invisible. Even today, we see evidence of bridge-building work that has become timeless and outlasted its historical context.

**“Being in relationship with the community makes the work tangible. Communities know their own experiences best and what solutions are most fitting.”**

-Razi Jafri

*Producer, Three Chaplains*

# Section IV

## Strategies to Support Bridge-Building

In addition to laying out best practices and raising questions for the future, at the November convening, practitioners offered strategies for current and prospective supporters of their work, including for institutions, funders and stakeholders more broadly, to support bridge-building efforts.

Here, **institutions** are defined as private and nonprofit affiliates, intermediaries, such as museums, theaters, conservatories, academic centers, or festivals and artist associations. The term **funders** includes public funders, those representing philanthropic foundations, corporate funders, community foundations or funder networks as also having an opportunity to support bridge-building work being led by practitioners.

Practitioners see an opportunity for institutions and funders to examine their role and place in bridge-building work. What follows are strategies and considerations shared by attendees for institutional and funding partners in the arts, media and humanities:

### Step outside of comfort zones

This first set of strategies centers around a desire by practitioners to see institutions and funders apply creative, bold and courageous approaches to their support of bridge-building.

1. **Think non-traditionally** - There is an opportunity for supporters to think about creative, non-traditional ways to center practitioners by promoting efforts that may veer away from their typical approaches. For example, an institutional partner like a theater may consider how they work with educators to translate their programs into classrooms. Funders might also consider unique grantmaking strategies, such as those that are more flexible, immediately available or have very broad project guidelines.

**“Outside partners continue to be necessary, especially given the limits of federal agencies. Federal employees rely on organizations’ relationships and trust to carry out their work and develop meaningful collaborations.”**

-Shelly C. Lowe (Navajo)  
*Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities*

**“Invest in imagination over the long-term and with flexible grants.”**

-Chera Reid

*Founder, Freedom Dreams in Philanthropy*

**2. Be a creative collaborator** - Practitioners shared that partners could support their work by acting as creative collaborators and working in tandem with practitioners to co-create projects and experiences. Practitioners welcome deep, thoughtful partnership and engagement by their supporting institutions and funders. By collaborating and working in lockstep with grantees, funders can identify unexpected, exciting new places for arts, media and humanities projects to be integrated.

**3. Be brave** - Institutional representatives spoke about the need to anchor, support and stand alongside artists, especially when artists are taking risks or speaking out at the risk of backlash. To support artists in these moments, partners can double down on their support, rather than detracting it. Examples include publishing statements of support or deepening individual investments. Also included in this invitation to be brave is an invitation for institutions and funders to be open to working with new partners that they may not have historically engaged or worked with.

**Three Chaplains**, a 2023 documentary produced by Razi Jafri and David Washburn (Director), is a film that documents three Muslim military chaplains' fight for equality and religious freedom in the U.S. military.

To promote the film, the Three Chaplains team created a paid fellowship program for college and graduate students that awards \$500 to one student per campus. Selected students earn a certificate in interfaith engagement and are required to host a film screening on their campus and convene a community conversation around the themes of pluralism and religious diversity. These stipends, while perhaps seen as small, have gone a long way for the team and the universities they've affected to date.

Providing smaller, real-time, quick funds for practitioners can foster local community engagement and elicit more creative methods of distribution.



## Redefine success

This next set of recommendations focuses on the potential for supporters to redefine success for projects.

### 1. **Prioritize process as much as outcomes** -

Practitioners observed that many funder applications or status reports often ask about the results, deliverables or outcomes of a project. Here, participants emphasize that funders can also consider supporting the process are taking. For example, funders can support curriculum-development so that other partners know how to intentionally incorporate practitioners' work into their own efforts.

### 2. **Consider indicators beyond scale** -

Current applications and post-project reports often focus on metric-driven results that prioritize a project's scale. While some projects are conducive to scaling, others may not be. For those that are, practitioners may need the time and space to build the civic infrastructure central to any healthy community before expanding a project and its reach. Funders can be better supporters by embracing the long-term nature of the field's theory of change. Funders can also adopt innovative evaluation frameworks and support earlier-stage, grassroots projects that welcome and expect longer-term, cultural change.

### 3. **Co-define success for projects** - As practitioners continue to grapple with the question of scale, institutions, foundations and other fiscal supporters can be intentional about co-creating their definitions of success alongside practitioners and project expectations, rather than applying umbrella definitions to all their grantees.

**“So many grants are about deliverables. But sometimes doing the thing, is the thing.”**

-Zaheer Ali

*Executive Producer, American Muslims:  
A History Revealed*

**“Building a network of institutional partners is as important as the content and editorial pieces. Networks are where the work happens, and a big project cannot be done when terms are being dictated top-down. We need a structure with the freedom that allows partners to be creative collaborators.”**

-Max Rudin

*President and Publisher, Library of America*

## Cultivate networks, both new and existing

Strategies outlined in this section are rooted in building and expanding the network of supporters and members engaged in the bridge-building field.

**“Keep bringing this community together (and expand the group if possible) to collaborate, build power, create new models, and support one another.”**

-Donald Young  
*Director of Programs,  
Center for Asian American Media*

1. **Engage technology, media and entertainment industries** - Institutions and funders have an opportunity to reach out to and develop relationships with sectors whose work is tangential to bridge-building work. For instance, institutions and funders can engage technology companies or media distributors to convene and strategize about how to support the bridge-building field through their own expertise. Developing intentional, long-term strategies with these affiliates and others, such as impact producers and publishers, can strengthen the visibility of work being done by practitioners.



Photo: Ari Scott

2. **Engage other issue-based funders** - The arts, media and humanities foster ideas, discussion and social change for a variety of topics. Funders that are not currently investing in these sectors have an opportunity to support creative projects that advance other portfolio objectives. For instance, funders who have traditionally supported democracy or civic engagement initiatives can consider how investments in creative storytelling and other bridge-building efforts can catalyze conversations and change for cross-sectional issues.

Ultimately, building partnerships with organizations often not associated with the arts, media and humanities can build a broader, aligned understanding of the role that the bridge-building field plays in fostering a pluralistic society.

**One Nation / One Project** is a national arts and health initiative designed to activate the power of the arts to repair the social fabric of the U.S. One Nation / One Project brings together artists, local governments, and community health providers to promote improved health outcomes in communities across the U.S.

In summer 2024, the **Arts for EveryBody** campaign convened community members across 18 cities and rural counties for a celebration of American pluralism. Collaborating partners included the National League of Cities, the George Washington University's Milken Institute School of Public Health, and Community Health Providers. The project was supported by the Doris Duke Foundation, in addition to several other funders, including Bloomberg Philanthropies, Kresge Foundation, Mellon Foundation, and The Tow Foundation.

3. **Foster public-private partnerships** - Funders can work with public sector partners to elevate the arts, media and humanities. When developing a public-private partnership, collaborating organizations can intentionally design systemic approaches, rather than project-specific ones. In this way, partnerships can be formed with a recognition that while change may be gradual or slow, partnership support continues to be worthwhile.

**The United We Stand Summit**, convened in Fall 2022 by the White House, addressed increases in hate-motivated attacks across the U.S. by bringing "Uniters" together—Americans who are actively working to bring communities together across racial, religious, political and other divides. This effort was supplemented by the creation of a joint initiative launched by the National Endowment for the Humanities and National Endowment for the Arts titled *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture*, which "leverages the arts and humanities to combat-hate motivated violence" by providing funding for programming efforts that contribute to civic engagement, social cohesion and cross-cultural understanding.

As of March 2024, the NEH has awarded over \$13 million in funding for humanities projects across all 56 states and jurisdictions and the NEA has awarded \$2 million for projects seeking to combat hate and promote civic engagement, social cohesion, and cross-cultural understanding.

**“I keep accessibility front of mind to support young artists, filmmakers and those who need support to do important work.”**

-Shelly C. Lowe (Navajo)

*Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities*

- 4. Work at the state and local level** - Private funders can help state and local groups by providing secure funding that can either supplement or fill gaps entirely in government funding. Larger funding institutions also have an opportunity to work in lockstep with local funders or intermediaries and funder collaboratives to help investments scale down to the local level, given the need for this work to occur in smaller community-based settings. Community foundations and intermediaries, in particular, play a unique role through their ability to concurrently engage large, national donors and their local community. They are both grantmakers and programming experts and can therefore be versatile and helpful partners.

**Indiana Humanities**, formed in 1972, is a state-wide nonprofit that infuses the humanities into the everyday lives of Hoosiers. Indiana Humanities provides grants, convenes discussions, uplifts humanities scholars, spotlights humanities organizations and activities, and creates its own programs that help Hoosiers think, read and talk.

As part of their strategy to reach Hoosiers in rural, urban, and suburban areas, Indiana Humanities works with intention to reach all 92 Indiana counties by partnering with state and local organizations including community foundations, libraries, cultural institutions and other community engaged non-profits.

**NEH’s State and Jurisdictional Humanities Councils** is a national network of affiliates in all 56 U.S. states and jurisdictions. These nonprofit organizations offer humanities education, lifelong learning opportunities and public humanities programming to communities across the country. Their work fosters social cohesion, promotes civic engagement and reflects the unique resources, demographics and concerns of their state or jurisdiction.

## Foster the future

Finally, practitioners urge partners to consider ways to ensure bridge-building projects and careers in the field are sustainably supported — both in the present and future.

- 1. Invest in long-term projects** - Grantees see the value in support of project-based work, or work that is time-bound. However, they also encourage funders to consider supporting “long-range” work, or work that may occur over a 5-, 10- or 15-year period with lasting impacts on behavioral and cultural change. By supporting long-term efforts, funders are able to provide projects with the time needed for more permanent cultural change to occur.
- 2. Maintain momentum by regularly convening current and emerging practitioners** - For practitioners, so much of the work done in bridge-building begins with community. Convening attendees expressed gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity to come together in-person. Many also hoped to more regularly participate in spaces designed for community, connection and collaboration among arts, media and humanities practitioners, including those who may not currently be connected to the bridge-building field. By organizing and hosting recurring in-person opportunities to connect, practitioners can more easily and effectively see themselves as a part of the bridge-building field, work to strengthen it and find community with other colleagues and potential collaborators.
- 3. Support careers, not just projects** -  
It must be acknowledged that having a primary career as an artist or related practitioner in the bridge-building field is often challenging, especially when relying on short-term, renewable funding. If bridge-building projects are considered a strong lever to increasing inclusivity and social cohesion, then it is imperative that practitioners’ livelihoods are sustainably supported. Strategies here might include providing long-term, flexible funding; providing emergency funds for grantees; increasing operational support for grantees; or deploying unique funding strategies, such as legacy funds or crowdfunding efforts.
- 4. Build the next generation of practitioners** - In addition to supporting current practitioners, funders have an opportunity to build and support the next generation of practitioners to sustain the work that is needed. This could occur through making creative spaces and tools available at no charge to emerging creatives and through funding professional development and training, paid internships, fellowships, apprenticeships, scholarships, community engagement programs or other modes of engaging creators. Funders may also be able to support socialization of the arts, media and humanities as a career by funding public campaigns, launching prize programs or sponsoring platforms for upcoming creators such as showcases and festivals.

**“We’re involved in generational work, and we need to be intentional about that. We need to steward work that will be passed onto others.”**

-Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD  
*Chair, National Endowment for the Arts*



# Section V

## Conclusion

This report synthesizes perspectives, takeaways and themes from the November convening that were shared by practitioners in the arts, media and humanities in the bridge-building field.

As noted in this report, the bridge-building field faces real challenges and tensions regarding whether to use a bottom-up localized approach or top-down content dissemination to best reach communities and how to address a downturn in ideological pluralism — as individuals and groups avoid engaging in conversation with those different from them out of fear of being judged or alienated.

During the gathering, it was clear that practitioners are hopeful despite an ever-changing and often challenging environment, in large part due to their unwavering commitment to fostering understanding and connection through their work. Throughout the convening, participants emphasized how the arts, media and humanities can lift up perspectives that have historically been ignored, erased or untold; highlight the diversity and vibrancy of U.S.-based communities; and provide spaces for acceptance, understanding and connection to occur due to shifting individual and collective viewpoints.



Photo: Leslye Davis

By tapping the successful strategies used on the ground — such as partnering with third-party spaces, customizing projects to communities, using inclusive facilitation and understanding the conditions and attitudes needed for these to work, including prioritizing process and leading with an open mind — the arts, media and humanities can continue to contribute to essential bridge-building efforts.

Funders and institutions alike are encouraged to model the bridge-building they want to see, step outside their comfort zone in how they support this work, redefine and co-define success together with practitioners, cultivate networks that will advance practitioners' work and maintain focus on a long-term vision.

At present, there is an undercurrent of energy for the bridge-building field to understand and share how the arts, media and humanities can bring communities together and build mutual understanding. Bridge-builders can use this momentum to continue this work. By working together, practitioners and supporters of bridge-building efforts can advance positive cultural change and strengthen inclusivity and social cohesion for generations to come.

# Appendix

## **Attendee Organizations**

Apollo Theatre

California Humanities

Center for Asian American Media

Center for Cultural Power

Freedom Dreams in Philanthropy

Humanities New York

Indiana Humanities

Library of America

Monument Lab

New America

Northwestern University

Performing Our Future

Race Forward

Roadside Theater

Tenement Museum

## **Other Attending Partners**

National Council on the Arts

President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities

El-Hibri Foundation

## **Attendee Books**

Art in a Democracy

## **Attendee Films**

Three Chaplains

American Muslims: A History Revealed

Stranger at the Gate

## Project Resources

**Khayál: A Multimedia Collection by Muslim Creatives**, Muslim Narrative Change Cohort, Pillars Fund, June 2023

- Publication produced by the Muslim Narrative Change cohort of the Pillars Fund, exploring the questions: What knowledge feels important to you? What have you been aching to explore but haven't had the support to do so?

**National Monument Audit**, Monument Lab, Laurie Allen, Paul Farber and Sue Mobley, October 2020–December 2021

- *The National Monument Audit* assesses the current monument landscape across the United States including approximately 50,000 monuments representing data collected from every US state and territory.

**Yes, and Laughter Lab: Uplifting Diverse Comedy for Social Change**, Caty Borum Chattoo and Mik Moore, Yes and... Laughter Lab, November 2020

- The report invites professional sectors — comedians, entertainment industry partners and collaborators and social justice and philanthropy leaders — to learn more about the Laughter Lab and consider the value it adds to their work.

**Coalition for Faith & Media BrandVoice: How Spiritual Values Fuel Today's Work & Tomorrow's Vision**, Forbes, October 16, 2024

- A series of video conversations with cultural leaders about how faith plays a role in their work in the music and entertainment sectors.

## Thought Leadership & Other Resources

**We Disagree on Many Things, but We Speak With One Voice in Support of Philanthropic Pluralism**, Heather Templeton Dill, Kathleen Enright, Sam Gill, Brian Hooks, Darren Walker, and Elise Westhoff, The Chronicle of Philanthropy, April 13, 2023

- A piece by major philanthropic leaders on the importance of philanthropic pluralism to support a strong philanthropic sector and democracy.

**What to Say on November 6 and How to Say It**, Drew Lindsay, The Chronicle of Philanthropy, October 24, 2024

- Reflections on the use of words that philanthropy and nonprofits employ and how they can bring people together after the election rather than stoke division.

**"Are the Arts Essential?,"** Edited by Alberta Arthurs and Michael DiNiscia, NYU Press, February 2022

- A collection of essays drawing on experiences from across the spectrum of the arts, reflection on the question: Are the arts essential?

## Authors & Acknowledgments

### ABOUT THE DORIS DUKE FOUNDATION

The mission of the Doris Duke Foundation is to build a more creative, equitable and sustainable future by investing in artists and the performing arts, environmental conservation, medical research, child well-being and greater mutual understanding among diverse communities. DDF's mission, grantmaking programs and centers are guided by Doris Duke's will.

### ABOUT THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

The National Endowment for the Arts is an independent federal agency that funds, promotes and strengthens the creative capacity of our communities by providing all Americans with diverse opportunities for arts participation. It has recommended approximately 2,700 grants annually in all 50 states, DC and U.S. territories.

### ABOUT THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

The National Endowment for the Humanities is an independent federal agency that supports the humanities in every state and U.S. jurisdiction. Since 1965, NEH has awarded over \$6 billion to support museums, historic sites, universities, teachers, libraries, documentary filmmakers, public TV and radio stations, research institutions, scholars and Indigenous communities.

### ABOUT FREEDMAN CONSULTING

This report was drafted by Freedman Consulting, LLC, a mission-driven firm that provides strategic consulting services to foundations, nonprofit organizations and public interest coalitions, advising many of the nation's leading philanthropic institutions. Authors include Mariana Botero, Kennedy Patlan, Joey Rauch and Sheridan Ruiz. Special thanks to Clarise Frechette for designing this report.

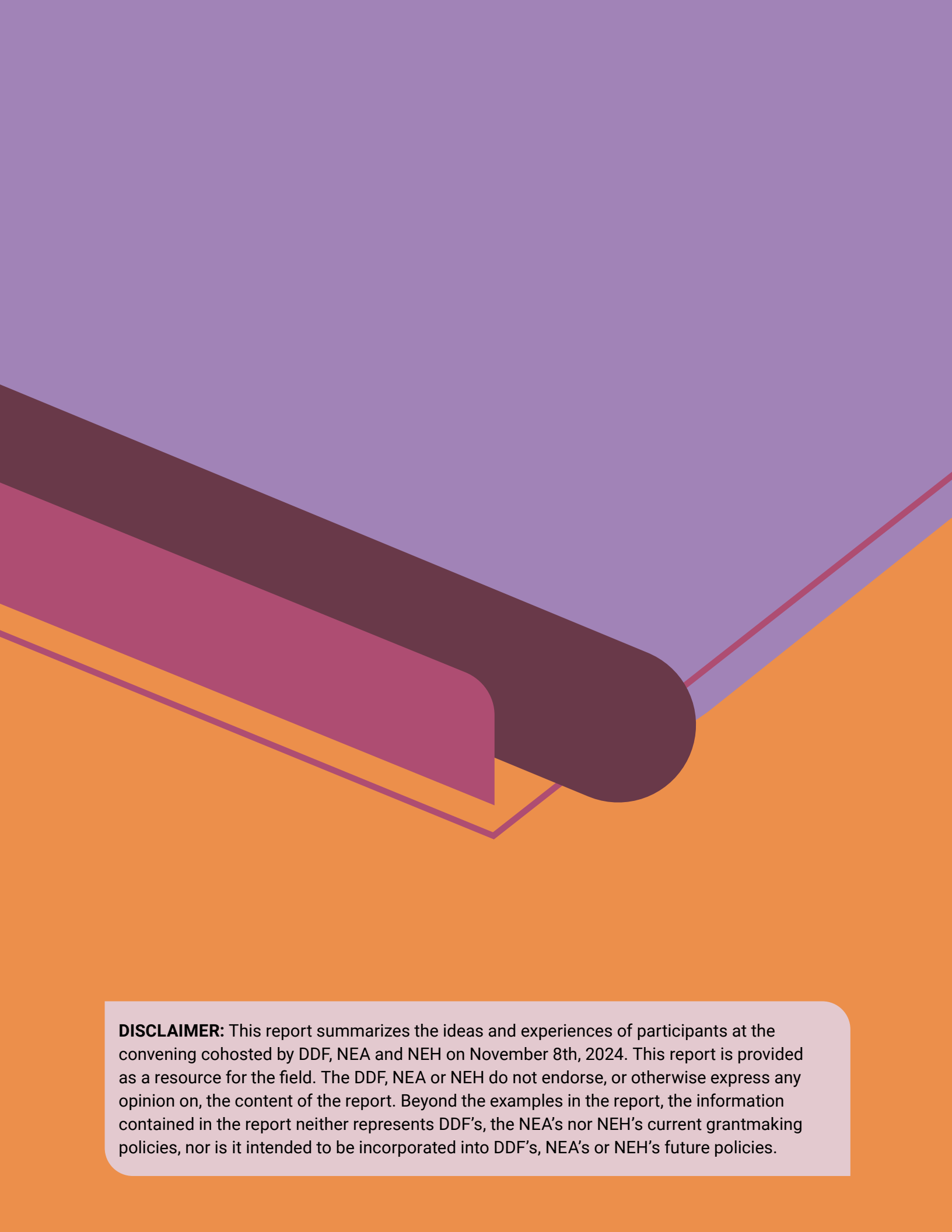
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An abstract graphic featuring a light purple background. A dark purple, rounded rectangular shape is positioned diagonally across the middle. Below it, a pinkish-purple shape is partially visible. The bottom right corner transitions into a solid orange background. A white rounded rectangle is located in the bottom left corner, containing a disclaimer.

**DISCLAIMER:** This report summarizes the ideas and experiences of participants at the convening cohosted by DDF, NEA and NEH on November 8th, 2024. This report is provided as a resource for the field. The DDF, NEA or NEH do not endorse, or otherwise express any opinion on, the content of the report. Beyond the examples in the report, the information contained in the report neither represents DDF's, the NEA's nor NEH's current grantmaking policies, nor is it intended to be incorporated into DDF's, NEA's or NEH's future policies.