



NATIVE ARTS AND CULTURES FOUNDATION

in partnership with

National Endowment for the Arts &
National Endowment for the Humanities

A report on the first national Native arts
and cultures collaborative convening
held on **FEBRUARY 14, 2020** in
Washington, D.C.

NATIVE ARTS AND CULTURE: RESILIENCE, RECLAMATION, AND RELEVANCE

Executive Summary

NATIVE ARTS AND CULTURES FOUNDATION, FEBRUARY 2021

Prepared by Vanessa Whang on behalf of Native Arts and Cultures Foundation.

Vanessa Whang has worked in the non-profit cultural field for over 30 years and in philanthropy for over 20. Her work is focused on advancing cultural equity and shifting the cultural frame in the U.S. from a singular hegemonic one to multiple ways of sensing, being, knowing, and valuing.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

OPENING CEREMONY & PERFORMANCES

Master of Ceremonies - Ruben Little Head (*Northern Cheyenne*)
Flag Song - Uptown Boyz (intertribal)
Posting of Colors Prayer - Native American Women Warriors Color Guard (intertribal)
Land Acknowledgement - Lillian Sparks Robinson (*Rosebud Sioux*)
Dance Performance - Christopher K. Morgan (*Native Hawaiian*)
Music Performance - Frank Waln (*Sicangu Lakota*)

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Flag Song - Uptown Boyz & Native American Women Warriors Color Guard

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The Native Arts and Cultures Foundation advances equity and cultural knowledge, focusing on the power of arts and collaboration to strengthen Native communities and promote positive social change with American Indian, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native peoples in the United States.

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a message from the NATIVE ARTS AND CULTURES FOUNDATION

In February 2020, a first-of-its-kind gathering took place in Washington, D.C., co-hosted by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation (NACF). *Native Arts and Culture: Resilience, Reclamation, and Relevance* brought together over 225 attendees including members from more than 40 tribal nations, representatives from over a dozen federal/state/regional entities, many Native artists and students, and non-profit professionals and funders who support Native peoples. The programming of the gathering was designed collaboratively by a Native Advisory Council formed by NACF and a Federal Planning Committee formed by the NEA and facilitated by Lillian Sparks Robinson (*Rosebud Sioux*), CEO of Wopila Consulting and former Commissioner of the Administration for Native Americans.

The vision for the convening began five years earlier, in 2015, when NACF initiated a dialogue with the NEA about the need for more collaboration among federal agencies and Native organizations, leaders, artists, and culture bearers. Discussions and gatherings had occurred with federal agencies and Native communities in many other sectors for decades, but there never had been a large convening focused solely on arts, cultures, and humanities. The time seemed ripe for bringing the field together. There was agreement that there should be more coordination and learning between federal cultural agencies and Native communities, which could lead to greater mutual understanding and a more robust Native arts and cultures ecology. At the prompting of NACF, First Peoples Fund, the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums, and other national Native-led organizations, NEA began a multi-year process of visiting Native-led programs and tribal governments and communities to listen and learn. Then after adjustments following the 2017 change of administration, in 2019, the planning could finally begin and the spark was fully ignited.

The convening could be described as a gathering of nations—with many Native participants bringing the distinct cultures and ideologies of their respective peoples into juxtaposition with each other and with the cultures and ideologies of the U.S. government. Though each is unique, one might safely say that Native worldviews rest upon the fundamental belief in the interdependence of all creation, as commonly suggested by the phrase “all my relations.” It was in this spirit that the gathering took place, bound by an ethic of cross-cultural respect in shaping constructive relationships and narratives, and providing groundwork for a better understanding of the multiplicity of Native peoples. In the U.S. alone, there are 574 federally recognized tribes, speaking over 150 languages and dialects, with distinct cultural practices, independent



governance and citizenship, and sovereign rights to unceded homelands. In addition to these tribes, there are currently 560,000 state-recognized Native Hawaiians living in Hawai'i and the continental U.S. There are also state-recognized tribes, unrecognized tribes, a myriad of uncounted and undocumented Native people, people of complex mixed-heritage identities, and a wide range of Indigenous peoples living in the U.S. from throughout the Americas. There is no Native American monolith.

The purpose of the convening was to be immersed in all this complexity together with our governmental partners who provide resources to Native America—for arts and archives, archeology and linguistics, and education and wellness—in order to listen, learn, and interact together. It was understood that this was to be the first convening of its kind, but not the last, and that there would be subsequent convenings with broader participation, informed by learnings and recommendations from this one. The gathering highlighted promising practices as well as common challenges in creating, sharing, curating, researching, and resourcing Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian arts, humanities, and cultural heritage.

We see this report as a way to memorialize the convening—so those who attended can remember it and those who were unable to attend can share in its richness—and to synthesize the learning so all may find a role in advancing Native arts and cultures. The report offers a set of field recommendations for future action. These were formulated from what was addressed at the convening, advice from the Advisory Council, and existing field knowledge. The recommendations point toward critical areas of work and they are an invitation for all to keep planning and working together.

We would be remiss not to acknowledge the extraordinary times we have been living in since the February convening. The ravages of COVID-19 and calls for a racial justice reckoning have not so much changed the situation we addressed at the convening as starkly illuminated it—revealing long-standing truths about inequities and injustices. We see this as a moment of reckoning for America. What we choose to address in our organizations and communities now has the ability to create a truly equitable future that can help shape the 21st century. Truth-telling about our histories and what has brought us to where we are now is required—such as the damage rooted in the Doctrine of Discovery, slavery, and settler colonialism. The crisis of the pandemic, desires for racial justice, and climate change are forcing tough questions and demanding brave answers about who we are as a country and who we can be.

Native sacred places, lifeways, and traditions have shaped this land since time immemorial—and Indigenous people continue to create, share, and inspire despite centuries of colonization. An essential component of justice for Native peoples is the value attributed to our arts and humanities. Lifting up our contemporary artistic expressions after generations of attempted erasure and reclaiming our languages, cultures, and histories are necessary acts of Indigenous resilience and liberation.

The gathering in 2020 was a step forward on the path of Native resilience, reclamation, and relevance, and we invite all who are dedicated to creating a better future to walk with us.

—The staff of the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation



FIELD RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

It is with commitment and hope that NACF puts forth these recommendations to the field. They were distilled from issues and ideas raised at the convening, advice from the Advisory Council, and knowledge built by many over time. The recommendations point toward critical areas of work and are an invitation to all who seek to strengthen the well-being of Native communities in America. It will take the collaboration of Native and non-Native peoples; the public, private, and non-profit sectors; and the goodwill and efforts of many individuals and communities to accomplish these goals.



Christopher K. Morgan & Aaron Salā

ADVANCE TRUTH-TELLING ABOUT NATIVE PEOPLES, HISTORY, AND OUR ARTS AND CULTURES

The ability of Native peoples to tell our own stories—about ourselves, our history, and the history of the U.S.—and to have those stories heard and amplified are vital to our survival and well-being. Steps needed to strengthen self-determined narratives include:

- Advance Native arts and cultures through Native-stewarded regular regional/national convenings for relationship building, knowledge sharing, and strategizing
- Develop, support, and conduct Native-driven and -defined research—e.g., regarding existing resources and infrastructure, and equitable cultural resource allocation for Native artists/culture bearers/cultural organizations
- Develop and disseminate educational materials from a Native perspective—e.g., regarding the dismantling of the [Doctrine of Discovery](#), documentation of the knowledge of Native elders, language revitalization, and contemporary Native arts practices

INCREASE NATIVE POWER IN POLICYMAKING AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

Native leadership and voice are needed in positions of influence and decision-making to shift institutional power, perspectives, and practices. Steps needed to increase Native power include:

- Advocate for Native power throughout the cultural field and its systems of support, including hiring/selecting Native people for positions in organizational leadership and staffs, and seats on boards, commissions, and advisory councils
- Build partnerships with public/semi-public cultural agencies and cultural institutions and associations to engage Native leadership in crafting policies on the curation, contextualization, access to, and use of Native material and ephemeral culture

- Create and develop more Native leadership and organizational development programs to better prepare Native cultural workers to rise in and lead museums and other arts and cultural organizations, philanthropic institutions, and public agencies

ADVOCATE FOR EQUITABLE RESOURCING OF NATIVE ARTISTS, CULTURE BEARERS, AND THE ARTS AND CULTURES FIELD

Equitable and decolonized resourcing of Native artists, culture bearers, and organizations for self-determined cultural production and infrastructure building is necessary for the advancement of Native justice. Steps needed to achieve equitable resourcing include:

- Advocate for non-Native arts and cultures funders to create/increase dedicated funding streams for Native artists, culture bearers, and arts & cultural organizations; engage knowledgeable intermediaries, when needed; and build long-term relationships with Native constituents
- Advocate for Native-led support systems and arts & cultural organizations
- Build partnerships with public/semi-public cultural funding entities (e.g., federal cultural agencies, state arts and humanities councils, regional arts organizations, etc.), private funders, and philanthropic associations to engage Native leadership in crafting policies to remove barriers and increase resources for Native artists, culture bearers, cultural organizations, and arts communities
- Increase opportunities for Native artists, culture bearers, and communities to exercise the power of creative practice to address positive social change, cultural revitalization, and community resilience

What follows are brief summaries of the formal presentations and sessions of the conference.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

On the cold, clear morning of February 14, 2020 at U.S. Poet Laureate and incoming NACF Board Chair Joy Harjo (*Mvskoke*) was the keynote speaker for the convening. Joy opened by reminding all that as we have familial ancestors, so we have organizational ancestors. She encouraged everyone to take in the depth and breadth of the moment—in its abundance and its adversity. “We are here to acknowledge the gift of the work we do, and all those whose lives are inspired, supported, and even changed by our efforts [...] If this country is to integrate spiritually, creatively, and profoundly, we must nourish the roots [...] Without the acknowledgement and inclusion of Indigenous roots, a land—a country—is unmoored, without stability.”

In her deep and wide-reaching address, Joy drew connections between the arts and our humanness, Native arts and the soul of this country, and how Native people, their rootedness to the land, and their embodiment of systems of knowledge are critical to the quality of life for all of us and to life itself.

Joy closed her remarks by underlining the purpose of the convening and situating it in its foundational context. “We are here together to carry the creative and thoughtful spirit of the people forward, to assist in feeding the imagination, the heart and soul of the people. It is only through art that humans acquire a knowledge that connects us as in that immense field of meaning, that connects us to each other, to the plant people and the animal people, to spirit and the earth.”



Lillian Sparks Robinson, Clifford Murphy, Lulani Arquette, Joy Harjo & Jon Parrish Peede

PANEL SESSIONS

Six panels took place throughout the day, exploring a range of topics designed to deepen understanding of and strengthen supports for Native arts and cultures. Panel speakers and moderators were Native leaders, artists, activists, curators, culture bearers, and educators, and they engaged with a diverse audience of Native artists and leaders as well as Native and non-Native colleagues from government agencies, foundations, and the non-profit arts and culture sector. Each session uniquely revealed the resilience of Native peoples through their contemporary artistic and cultural expressions and the work to revitalize, reclaim, and sustain Indigenous knowledge.

PANEL 1: INFORMING NATIVE TRUTH THROUGH RESEARCH AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

Moderator **Betsy Richards** (*Cherokee*, [The Opportunity Agenda](#)) framed the panel session around the importance of the stories Native people tell about themselves and how to advance a national dialogue to shift dominant narratives and positively effect change in attitudes, behaviors, practices, and policies for Native peoples. **Crystal Echo Hawk** (*Pawnee*, [IllumiNative](#)) addressed the issue of the systematic erasure of Native peoples and what could be done to counter invisibility. Her talk centered on the findings from [Reclaiming Native Truth](#), the largest public research project of its kind. **Shelly Lowe** (*Navajo*, [Harvard University Native American Program](#)) principally addressed the functions of the NEH and NEA and their resources for Native peoples. She gave examples of projects that seek to strengthen Native control over their cultural heritage. She also pointed to the challenges of institutionalizing practices and ways of thinking that lift up Native perspectives. **Francene Blythe** (*Diné/Eastern Band of Cherokee/Dakota*, [Native Arts and Cultures Foundation](#)) outlined the history and trajectory of NACF and its new endeavors in the realm of support for Native artists and culture bearers, advancement of positive Native narratives, and catalyzing efforts for social and environmental justice.

PANEL 2: RECLAIMING AND REVITALIZING NATIVE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Moderator **Lori Pourier** (*Oglala Lakota*, [First Peoples Fund](#)) underlined the importance of hearing from those who hold their Native languages and recognizing the role they play in revitalizing and sustaining community life and knowledge. **Donald Soctomah** (*Passamaquoddy*, [Passamaquoddy Tribe](#)) focused his presentation on some of the first field [recordings made on wax cylinders](#) from the late 1800s that are housed at the Library of Congress and their role in revitalizing Passamaquoddy language and practices. He remarked, “The voices of our grandfathers that came back . . . they’re energizing another generation, so that the songs and the stories will never leave our community, no matter what forces are trying to take it away.” **jessie little doe baird** (*Wôpanâak*, [Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project](#)) focused her presentation on the journey she took to found the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project and what it has meant to the restoration of her language and the fight to save her traditional homelands. **Delores Churchill** (*Haida*, Weaver/Visual Artist, NEA National Heritage Fellow) spoke about different methods in the Northwest to reclaim Haida and Tlingit language and cultural practices—from Hawaiian-styled “language nests” to intergenerational programs at senior centers. She particularly highlighted the efforts of young Native researchers who are studying both with elders and in education and language programs at universities.

PANEL SESSIONS

PANEL 3:

THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS ARTS, HUMANITIES, AND PRACTICES IN SOCIAL CHANGE

Moderator **Lulani Arquette** (*Native Hawaiian, [Native Arts and Cultures Foundation](#)*) focused on the panelists' efforts in support of their communities regarding the lifting of Native voices and visibility, preservation of and access to material culture, and maintenance of cultural practices and sacred sites—as well as the challenges of doing this work.

Maya Austin (*Pascua Yaqui/Blackfeet, [California Arts Council](#)*) addressed the evolving nature of Native American storytelling through film and media. She outlined how she sees the phases of development in this sector, the generations of Native filmmakers who are influencing and being influenced by each other's work, and the possibilities that are opening up for the next generations. **Joyce Begay-Foss** (*Navajo, museum professional/ [weaver](#)*) spoke about passing on knowledge of Native cultural practices and histories to new generations, the importance of place in grounding that knowledge, and the necessity for Native peoples to be able to control access to their material culture and how it is interpreted. **Patrick Makuakāne** (*Native Hawaiian, [Nā Lei Hulu I Ka Wēkiu Dance Company](#)*) discussed how the deeper value of dance is not necessarily in its performative aspect, but in experiencing vulnerability, humility, strength, and connection while dancing. He highlighted his work as a spiritual advisor at San Quentin prison and his activism to preserve Maunakea as a sacred site.

PANEL 4:

NATIVE & NON-NATIVE COLLABORATION: INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS THAT MATTER

Moderator **Joseph Kunkel** (*Northern Cheyenne, [Sustainable Native Communities Collaborative](#)*) facilitated presentations about collaborations between Native and non-Native peoples, organizations, agencies, and institutions and how these kinds of collaborations can be both transformative and strengthened. **Christopher K. Morgan** (*Native Hawaiian, [Dance Place/Christopher K. Morgan and Artists](#)*) has trained in ballet, modern dance, jazz, and hula. His training has informed his work as an intercultural artist and administrator. His story mainly centered on how crossing cultural borders can provoke pushback from both sides and how a Native curator can collaborate with a historically White-led cultural institution to good effect. **Anna Needham** (*Red Lake Ojibwe, [Arizona Commission on the Arts](#)*) focused her comments on how she sees arts funding practices needing to change in order to serve Native artists and communities better—particularly from her point of view as an artist, Indigenous rights advocate, and new generation funder. **Daryl Baldwin** (*Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, [Myaamia Center](#), Miami University, OH*) is the founding director of the Myaamia Center, which is dedicated to the promotion and revitalization of Myaamia language, culture, knowledge, and values. The Center is the impressive result of an uncommon partnership of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma with Miami University. Daryl shared the story of how the Myaamia Center was founded and the characteristics of the relationship that made it possible.

PANEL SESSIONS

PANEL 5:

FOR US, BY US, WITH US: HOW TRADITIONS AND VALUES INFORM INDIGENOUS ARTS TODAY

Moderator **Carolyn Melenani Kuali'I** (*Native Hawaiian/Mescalero Apache*, [Kua'aina Associates](#)) shared a couple of key questions that she used to frame the panel:

- How do traditions and values inform Indigenous art today?
- How do innovation, evolution, tradition, and authenticity blur the lines between Western concepts of tradition and contemporary Native art?

Andre Perez (*Native Hawaiian*, [Ko'ihonua](#)) told of his journey in the revitalization of Hawaiian wood carving, specifically to the carving of Ki'i (god images) that has been part of resurrecting Hawaiian ceremonial practices. **Winoka Yepa** (*Navajo*, [Institute of American Indian Arts' Museum of Contemporary Native Arts](#)) is a doctoral candidate in education and museum studies at the University of New Mexico with research focused on identifying alternative representations of Indigenous identity from a decolonization perspective. She spoke about her investigations into how art-based practices and Navajo philosophy can impact the development of identity for Indigenous youth. **Aaron Salā** (*Native Hawaiian/Samoan*, [Hawai'i Arts Alliance](#)) has trained in voice and piano in the Western European classical tradition and in traditional Hawaiian chant. He addressed the productive tensions between Hawaiianness and non-Hawaiianness in himself and more broadly of such cultural tensions in society.

PANEL 6:

REIMAGINING NATIVE VISIBILITY AND IDENTITY IN URBAN AREAS

Moderator **Reuben Roqueñi** (*Yaqui/Mayo/Chicanx*, [Native Arts and Cultures Foundation](#)) opened the panel by saying that the reality of Native lives in urban settings is complicated and pointed out that "the issues that affect our communities are global issues, and they affect all of us." **Murielle Borst Tarrant** (*Kuna/Rappahannock*; [Actor, Director, Producer](#)) described some of the history of how Native people migrated to New York City, challenges of being a Native theater artist there, and the role of theater in maintaining culture and having a voice. **Lyz Jaakola** (*Anishinaabe*, [Fond du Lac Tribal College](#)) is the founder of the Oshkii Giizhik Singers and Director of [Ojibwemowining Resource Center](#) in Minnesota. She told the story how she started down the road that led her to her life in song and promoting singing as a way to keep culture, strengthen community, and lift up Native points of view. **Dylan A.T. Miner** (*Métis*, [Michigan State University](#)) is an [artist](#) and Director of [American Indian and Indigenous Studies](#). His presentation demonstrated how his work as an academic and as an artist is grounded in Native history and practices and how he is committed to making those visible through his visual art and his work with youth.

PERFORMANCES

The panel sessions were punctuated with performances by dancer and choreographer Christopher K. Morgan (*Native Hawaiian*) and hip-hop artist Frank Waln (*Sicangu Lakota*).

Christopher performed solo on the lecture stage in a playful, interactive, and improvisational piece that integrated his diverse range of movement vocabularies—ballet, modern, post-modern, and hula—and explored the question of what it means to be an artist and his own identity within that. “One thing that I would love the broader population and then federal agencies [...] to know about Native artists is that it is a really vibrant and thriving and contemporary group of artists that are making the work happen. A lot of times we hear words like “folk” and “tradition” and those are a part of who we are, but in fact a lot of the work that’s happening has a really broad array of contemporary influences both from our Indigenous cultures and from the world at large.”

Frank, a multidisciplinary artist and one of the youngest participants at the convening, expressed his gratitude to the attendees whose many years of work and commitment he was indebted to and from which he was able to form his path of arts and activism. His performance was an offering of flute playing from his own Lakota roots and some spoken word from hip-hop culture, which he sees as “an Indigenous art form created by Indigenous people who are cut off from their roots in Africa.”

CONFERENCE TAKEAWAYS

The convening ended with a “big ideas” plenary and breakout sessions designed to gather ideas to be acted on in the short term, planned for in the medium term, or discussed at future convenings. Many practical steps, lessons, and unaddressed concerns arose in those sessions. These ideas and issues were captured and combined with resonant points from panel sessions so that they could all inform and inspire the field recommendations of this report. The list included Native voice and leadership; increased access to resources; Native-informed research, terminology, and museum policy; Native language and cultural practices; and content for future convenings. These conference takeaways are enumerated in an [addendum](#) of the full report and are meant to help ground the higher level field recommendations for future action.





Delores Churchill speaking during a Big Ideas session

For more detailed descriptions of the conference proceedings, see the full report at nativeartsandcultures.org.





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