



# Humanities in Action: A National Perspective

Prepared by PennPraxis with PA Humanities

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# introduction

Here is a powerful antidote to eulogies proclaiming the demise of the humanities. Flip through these pages and you'll find they are not only alive, they're thriving in communities big and small in all corners of the country.

I've had the pleasure of being a witness and participant in this growing movement of everyday people using the humanities as the critical means to lasting social change. The results are so impressive they've inspired us at PA Humanities to pursue a series of participatory research projects over recent years to dive deeper and share our learnings.

This report builds on this ongoing work, featuring some amazing people and community organizations from across America, with unique missions and populations served. They share a common commitment to celebrate stories and experiences, make long term local investments, and courageously embrace transformation. Their work exemplifies the humanities in action -- even if they might not describe it that way.

The terminology and audiences served may vary, but we found a rich overlap between the applied humanities and the practices of community development and creative placemaking. That's what this research is really all about: beginning a conversation about the exciting opportunities for new synergies between a diverse cross-section of practitioners, funders, and communities served.

This report is special to me because it provided much needed national context to our work, giving impetus and justification to pioneer the PA Humanities Discovery Project with Drexel University, the next chapter in our research, which is mapping, networking, and celebrating our state's humanities landscape.

I'm so grateful to the team at PennPraxis who helped us start this project in 2019, sustaining progress even through the challenges of the pandemic. They were a phenomenal partner who went on this exploratory journey with us -- with no idea of what we would find -- pushing us to better articulate our definition of the humanities and ultimately positioning us as a thought leader and co-learner in the research process.

I'd also like to give special thanks to this project's national advisors and the other folks on the ground. Despite all the trials of the past few years, they shared heartfelt truths about their work and communities, which was the wind in the sails of this research. In the process they revealed the vibrancy of the humanities and how it's beautifully woven into the fabric of American life.

They got the conversation started and you're invited to help keep it going. Won't you join us?

In gratitude,



Laurie Zierer  
Executive Director, PA Humanities



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# preface

In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 reckonings for racial justice and equity, PA Humanities engaged PennPraxis, the center for applied research and practice at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design, to examine how the humanities are contributing to civic engagement, creative placemaking, and community development across the nation. This undertaking was intended to explore the work of PA Humanities among other organizations, funders, and practitioners pursuing similar initiatives, and position a new research frame for said work. The research revealed many commonalities between the humanities and the broader work of community development, with robust possibilities for future collaborations between the fields. PA Humanities saw the completion of the research as an opportunity to highlight the recovery and response techniques that various groups employed to take action for their communities during 2020. This added layer further demonstrates how the humanities can be a force for equitable social change.

PA Humanities, an independent nonprofit partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is doing groundbreaking work by putting the humanities in action for community-led change with their resident-led special projects. They work to bring Pennsylvanians together to shape the future through the power of stories, reflection, and relationships. Their mission is to champion the humanities as a means to spark civic engagement, build community, educate, inspire, make long-lasting change, and create an equitable society. This “applied-humanities” frame, as Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon from “Animating Democracy” have called it, has allowed PA Humanities to engage with new constituencies and projects working in community development and economic revitalization, while cultivating even stronger relationships with long-standing stakeholders such as local libraries, universities, and historical associations. PA Humanities seeks high-impact and concrete outcomes to demonstrate the value and meaning of the humanities as an approach to addressing complex challenges, including economic inequities, educational disparities, and civic disengagement.<sup>1</sup> Their work is grounded in a collaboration with people, bringing residents together to shape their future through the power of stories, reflection, and relationships.

The following paper reflects multiple phases of research and engagement. The first, in early 2019, consisted of an overview of research on the field of public humanities, and the formation of an advisory group. This group—composed

of leaders in this work from across the country—helped identify and reinforce themes and case studies to fuel a second, more targeted, phase of research. This second phase, late 2019 to early 2020, included a honing of emerging themes within the humanities that contribute to community development, civic engagement, and placemaking as well as interviews with organizations and practitioners across the country whose work exemplifies these themes. Two of PA Humanities’ projects (Chester Made and its pilot of PA Heart & Soul in Greater Carlisle, Pennsylvania) were included in this group. What emerged during this phase was a snapshot of how several community-led organizations and projects are utilizing the humanities, whether they call it as such or not, to enact tangible social change; and the challenges they still face in pursuing this work. They represent a broad spectrum of locations throughout the United States, in big cities and small towns, working with communities whose time in the country may date back a few years, or many generations. The compendium of research revealed exciting commonalities across organizations and projects that pointed to possibilities for collaboration and major lessons to share across the public humanities.

Though the initial research was completed before the onset of the pandemic and the year’s invigorated racial justice movements, in late 2020 PennPraxis re-connected with the spotlighted organizations (the third phase of this paper) to understand how their work may have shifted in response to the year’s challenges. Ultimately, the stories in this report underscore the power of the humanities to manifest social change, respond to community needs in real time, and embrace a commitment to participatory learning in partnership with residents in their communities. These lessons present exciting opportunities for collaborative practice, future research, and novel approaches to funding, with the potential to unite the humanities, placemaking, and community development sectors on a common path forward.



Julie T. Donofrio  
Managing Director, PennPraxis,  
Stuart Weitzman School of Design

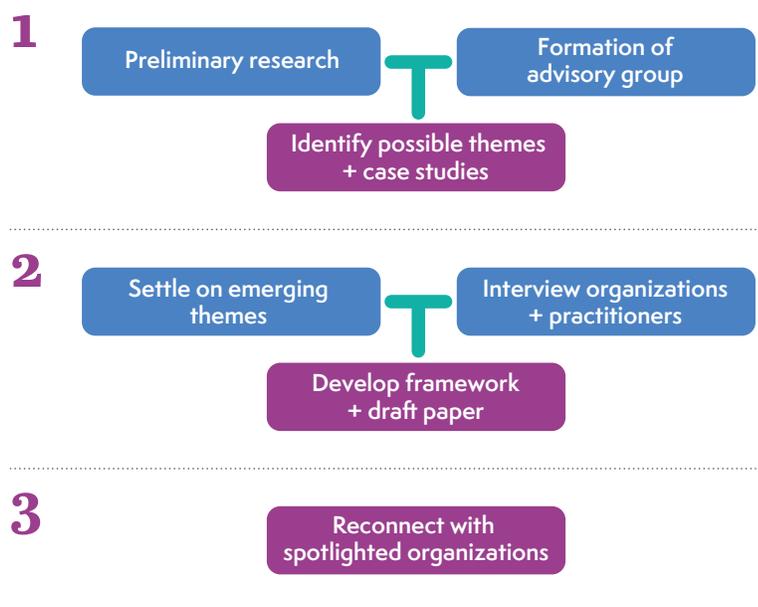
# I. Methodology and Research

The first phase of research for this paper examined current theories, methodologies, and toolkits that promote the humanities' role in civic engagement and community development. These included discussions of, techniques for, and studies on cross-disciplinary collaboration, healing-centered engagement, participatory policymaking, reexamining and redefining expertise, and the role of philanthropy in the humanities.

Practitioners in the scientific and medical fields have been investigating the potential benefits of the humanities for some time, calling for the union of the humanities and science to create new forms of awareness and activism in society through spatial justice.<sup>2</sup> In many instances the humanities can serve as the link between academics, practitioners, and residents for collaboration and cooperation in efforts to create “more humane and democratic environments.”<sup>3,4</sup> The medical field has also been exploring the integration of storytelling and creative engagement strategies to create a healing-centered approach, rather than trauma-informed care—as it involves culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing.<sup>5</sup>

The call for cross-disciplinary interaction between the humanities, social justice, design, and policy has manifested in an exploration of techniques for creative placemaking and participatory policymaking through storytelling, discussions around identity, and the promotion of cross-cultural empathy.<sup>6</sup> Yanu Endar Prasetyo's article “From Storytelling to Social Change: The Power of Story in the Community Building” explains that storytelling serves to exchange and consolidate learning, build trust, and shape identity, culture, and social movements. For example, sharing Native Peoples' experiences with place changes the narrative and ownership of place, decentering the expert in canonical placemaking discourse and practice. Storytelling in participatory policymaking can be a transformative model of equitable development by leveraging local knowledge and culture with economics, political science, philosophy, sociology, and community psychology—as discussed by Kiley K. Arroyo. To capture the interests of traditional policymakers, Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa break down the challenges to creative placemaking and how to make it successful by summarizing economic research and case studies; showing policymakers the “data” of how creative placemaking can be successful with the proper policy support.

Practitioners, nonprofits, and organizations representing historically marginalized groups have published myriad toolkits and guides to educate peers and allies on best practices for using the aforementioned strategies for civic engagement,



placemaking, and community development that build relationships, express identity, and create cross-cultural empathy.<sup>7</sup> These practices challenge harmful narratives, flip the definition of expertise, and develop leadership among those who have traditionally lacked civic power. The “Asian American Racial Justice Toolkit” and “Honor Native Land Guide” provide educational, empowerment, and leadership tools for Asian Americans and Native Peoples to act as their own advocates and experts.

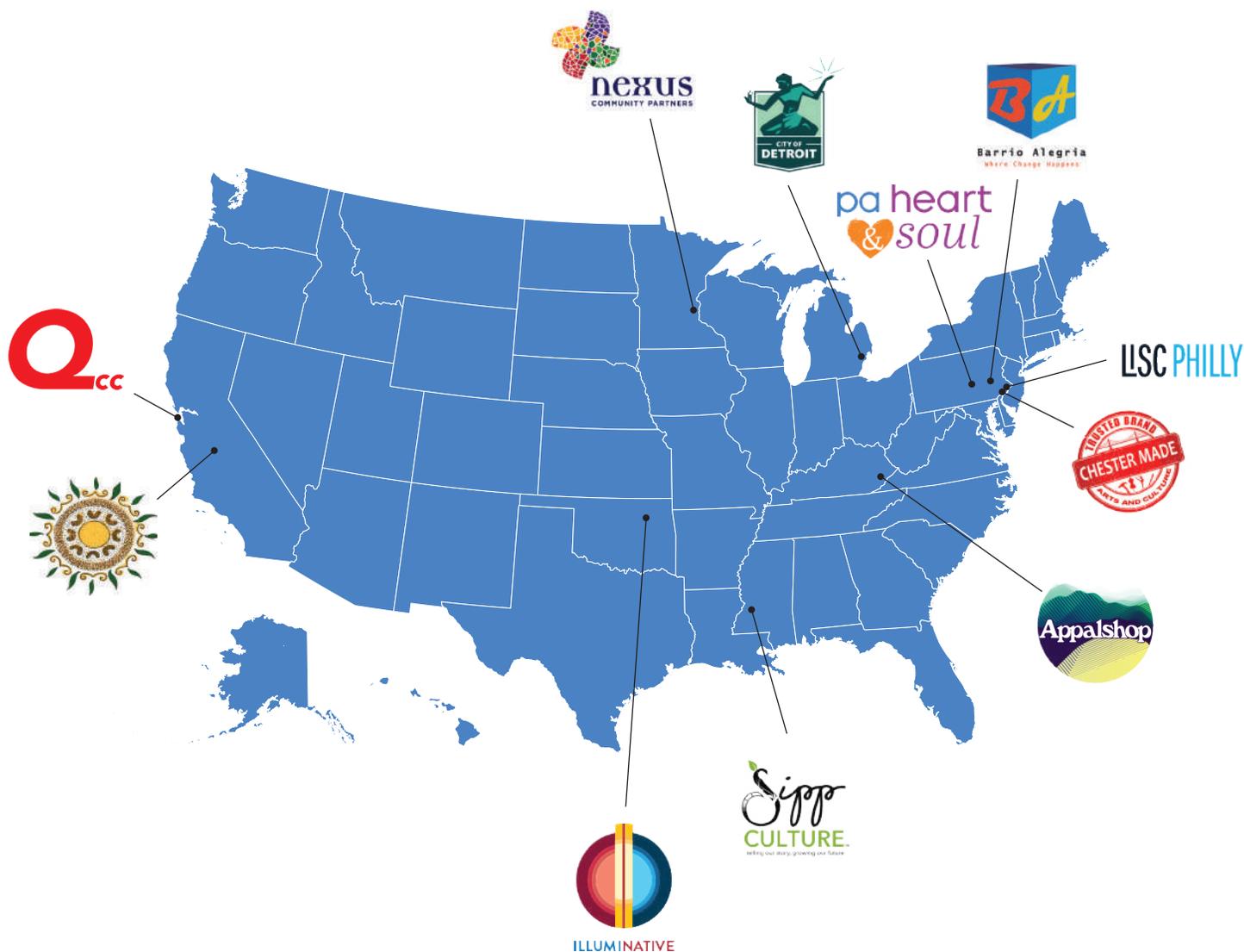
Other models are aimed at bringing new voices to the table by identifying and celebrating commonalities among disparate groups, such as “Shifting Expectations.” and “Cultural Organizing as Critical Praxis,” which describes one of the included case studies. Still other toolkits’ goals are building allies through education, like “Reclaiming Native Truth” and “Native American Creative Placemaking.” Additionally, Rick Davies and Jess Dart’s “Most Significant Change” Technique (MSC) focuses on a participatory form of monitoring and evaluation that gathers a fuller, more accurate picture of results told through a community voice. They also call on philanthropic groups for the humanities to reconsider evaluation requirements for their funding. This leads into how philanthropic groups can play a role in supporting and expanding the role of humanities in nontraditional directions.

Funding, which in its current form has been challenged as inequitable and too rigid, is a vital ingredient for the humanities to prosper and achieve meaningful impacts. While many philanthropic organizations, PA Humanities included, have begun to recognize and address the long standing biases of “traditional” funding, Helicon Collaborative’s recent study on the distribution of funding to humanities groups revealed that funding, overall, has gotten less equitable.<sup>8</sup> Their study calls on cultural philanthropy to “honestly examine” their contributions and willingness to address inequity, including looking into the lack of diversity among cultural philanthropy leaders. PA Humanities recognizes the untapped potential of the humanities to enact social and narrative change but is limited without collaboration and partnership of other like-minded funders. The Kettering Foundation’s symposium *Our Divided Nation: Is There a Role for Philanthropy in Renewing Democracy?* brought together grantmakers and philanthropists to address the issues of equity and discuss how to give the public more control over the priorities of grantmaking organizations. More and more inquiries of this type are taking place, yet the need for further expansion, and implementation of new norms, remains.

Following the first phase of broad research, PennPraxis transitioned into primary research, beginning with the formation of an advisory group of leading practitioners who employ the humanities in civic engagement, placemaking, and community development. The group participated in an online convening during which each member shared their background, experiences, and an example of a successful project that exemplified a novel application of the humanities in place. The advisory group then collectively discussed the common threads they heard across narratives. These common threads became the starting point for identifying overarching themes and emergent concepts that have the potential to enrich and expand the humanities to be a force for equitable social change—in other words, the framework for this report.

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# case studies



Following the advisor meeting, PennPraxis identified and conducted preliminary research on more than a dozen case studies (many of which were directly spoken about or suggested by an advisor) to better explore and craft a narrative around the identified themes and concepts. Eleven organizations/projects were ultimately selected for more focused research and interviews; their stories are explored throughout this report.

# national advisors

## **Kimberly Driggins**

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## **Daniel Egusquiza**

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Social research activist artist

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



“It starts in the neighborhoods, on the ground, taking the time to look at the world around you. What’s the human capital, what are the inspirations? That’s where the humanities come from. My hope is that community development and placekeeping will eventually cross paths and intersect, working together with the humanities.”

— Melissa Kim, (former) Deputy Director, LISC Philadelphia

## II. What are the humanities and how are they being deployed?

For the purpose of this research—an examination of progressive and innovative applications of the humanities, specifically as related to creative placemaking, civic engagement, and community development—it was critical to establish a shared understanding of what constitutes such work. The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), identifies the humanities as the study and interpretation of a specific set of disciplines:

Founded in 1965, along with the National Endowment for the Arts, NEH was established by the federal government to support the teaching and practice of academic humanities by university-based scholars and the public humanities by people who work in museums, schools, libraries, neighborhood organizations, and other places because *democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens. It must therefore foster and support a form of education, and access to the arts and humanities, designed to make people of all backgrounds and wherever located masters of their technology and not its unthinking servants.*<sup>9</sup>

Legislation of the Endowments was predicated on a premise, argued since ancient times, that the arts and humanities have civic, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual value for American society.

This definition and founding legislation emphatically acknowledge and value the diversity of humanity and the myriad contributions such diversity has for preserving and celebrating our shared culture; nonetheless, for more than 50

***Those working in the field of community development—such as community activists, artists, and grassroots organizers, often the very same who have been excluded from “traditional humanities” spheres—have been employing the humanities in action for years, though perhaps not labeled as such.***

years it has focused the NEH’s resources within a defined sphere of those cultural and educational organizations that practice and define the humanities in largely academic terms and rely on the expertise of academy scholars.

This practice has reinforced the belief that the humanities exist only for a

privileged few and are thus inaccessible to those who have been historically excluded from, or actively choose not to engage with, such institutions.

Those working in the field of community development—such as community activists, artists, and grassroots organizers, often the very same who have been excluded from “traditional humanities” spheres—have been employing the humanities in action for years, though perhaps not labeled as such. An example of this can be found in creative placemaking and its closely related practice of placekeeping, which emerged to denote partnerships between the artistic community and built environment professionals to create renewed pride and

activation of public space and civic assets. While placemaking and keeping often involve sharing histories and stories, artistic and cultural expression, and even performance or facilitated exercises, they have rarely—if ever—been described as the humanities.

*The humanities help people: build connections, make spaces for new voices, create empathy and a sense of belonging, support vibrant local communities, foster resiliency and healing, develop leadership skills, improve critical thinking and instill educational tools, and challenge prejudices.*

State humanities councils, like PA Humanities, were created by the NEH in the 1970s as what Elizabeth Lynn calls an “ongoing experiment” to ensure greater access to the public humanities for all citizens, strengthen American democracy and good citizenship, and be responsive to the needs of the time.<sup>10</sup> One of 56 state and territorial humanities councils in the United States, PA Humanities reinterpreted this mission in 2012. According to Executive Director Laurie Zierer, “I’ve always liked how author and folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston defined ‘research,’ as ‘poking and prying with a purpose.’ Our experience at the time was that people in our state wanted to poke and pry with a purpose, to ask big questions about what they value, and make real change in their lives and communities.” Most importantly, according to Zierer, “People wanted to be part of leading that change and creating places where everyone can belong and thrive. They were tired of talking about change. They want to see action—and they want to lead it themselves.” She continues, “We now imagine a future where all Pennsylvania residents have access without barriers to the humanities and understand the tools to learn and lead change in their communities.”

PA Humanities, an innovative thought leader among state humanities councils, recognizes the largely untapped potential for the humanities to enact social and narrative change, provided that funders, philanthropic organizations, and the academy are willing to learn, adapt, and distribute leadership and decision-making to new, diverse partners. Over the last decade PA Humanities has challenged more traditional definitions of the humanities; working to demonstrate what the humanities can achieve when supported by meaningful investments (both monetary and time-based) and an asset-driven approach that treats every community as important, knowledgeable, and capable. PA Humanities is redefining the humanities as the means by which we come to understand, support, and celebrate the human experience. Storytelling, historical perspectives, personal interpretation, creativity, and deliberative conversations are the tools that the humanities provide everyday people. Equipped with these resources, communities document their own culture, build upon their life-long education, and move forward in shaping their homes.



“I don’t always define my work as the humanities, simply because that term doesn’t mean much in the communities where I work. It makes more sense if I define my work as a combination of community outreach and history.”

— Lindsay Houpt-Varner, (former) Community Engagement Director, Cumberland County Historical Society

The results are transformative insights into ourselves and our world, inspiring us to work together for a more equitable society. The humanities help people: build connections, make spaces for new voices, create empathy and a sense of belonging, support vibrant local communities, foster resiliency and healing, develop leadership skills, improve critical thinking and instill educational tools, and challenge prejudices. The dialogue encouraged by the humanities leads to civic engagement, which drives us to collective action.

PA Humanities takes a broad approach by showing how to use the humanities as a tool for critical thinking and belonging. With their practical education and research, PA Humanities supports residents to make a difference and enact change in their communities.

The projects reviewed for this paper—several of PA Humanities’ collaborative partnerships among them—are all situated at the intersection of the “applied humanities” and community development. Together, they challenge the status quo of what the humanities can and should be. While each of the projects or organizations define their work differently, they share a common thread of working with unwavering focus to improve the quality of life of the community and place they represent—whether it comprises a single neighborhood or ethnic community, an expansive geographic region or the entire United States. The project leaders are artists, funders, writers, actors, community organizers, and historians, working with vastly different communities and geographies, yet employing many overlapping tactics to make change in a distinct set of categories that support mutual learning and validated diverse experiences.

In conducting the research, nearly all interviewees were asked if they defined their work as the humanities. Nearly all did not. This was largely because they view the term as alienating to the audiences with whom they work. But these organizations undeniably embody the foundational principle of the humanities—an exchange of knowledge using human connection. Rather than fostering theoretical discussions, they seek to achieve more tangible impacts capable of cultivating sustainable social change for a more equitable future. While the terminology does not fit their own stated sense of practice, PA Humanities and PennPraxis believe a consideration of humanities within expanded fields may result in increased possibilities for funding, new partnerships, and an impact on the largely academic establishment of humanities to recognized and support a multiplicity of narratives. We find that storytelling, discussions around identity, and the promotion of cross-cultural empathy link each of the organizations and projects discussed. These three practices are emblematic of the humanities, particularly when applied to civic engagement, creative placemaking and keeping, or community development.

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Photo: Appalshop/Appalachian Media Institute

## storytelling

The finding and sharing of stories is a key methodology that humanities practitioners use across all stages of their work.

It is used at the beginning of a process to seek out what problems are important to communities, inform programming, highlight characteristics and assets of the communities and those that reside in them, and allow people to make meaning together. Alternatively, storytelling may be, in and of itself, the subject, goal, or product of a project. It can also be a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of a project or organization. Finding and expressing stories requires a great deal of time and energy across organizations and is approached slightly differently in each individual community to match the specific needs and experiences of its residents.

The definition of storytelling in this context is perhaps one of the greatest departures between traditional and applied humanities. Here storytelling is not poetry and book readings of celebrated authors, or performances by external playwrights and actors. Instead, for PA Humanities and the practitioners represented in this research it is stories authored by the people themselves—facilitated, developed, and shared in public arenas. Stories are an invitation to engage, a call to action, and a means to create knowledge, enabling people to hear and honor each other's personal histories, cultures, and lived experiences, fostering shared

*Stories are an invitation to engage, a call to action, and a means to create knowledge, enabling people to hear and honor each other's personal histories, cultures, and lived experiences, fostering shared understanding and empathy through an open dialogue.*

understanding and empathy through an open dialogue. Storytelling also provides a venue to release feelings of trauma, a therapeutic act for communities that have experienced long-term assaults on their safety, pride, and well-being. Most importantly, this method puts the power in people's hands rather than outside "experts," to document their own culture, knowledge, and talents. Such instances of storytelling put those who "own" the story front and center, acknowledging their power, agency, and unique contributions to society. Storytellers speak their truth, become today's leaders, celebrate their own culture, and create their own histories and vibrant local economies.

Scholars have well-documented how storytelling contributes positively to community development. It helps to build trust, share knowledge, facilitate narrative change, and create lasting connections among previously unassociated individuals or groups.<sup>11</sup> Through the sharing of experiences, participants are able to see the power and value of this action, and how it can be channeled into agency. The more that connections and commonalities are identified, the larger the cohort of those who can act in unison to enact change, despite previously conceived differences or feelings of disaffectedness. The momentum and shared understanding built through storytelling can also determine what a shared vision for an improved future state might be and empower community members to work together to achieve collective goals that they perhaps were unable to as individuals. For Dawn Frisby Byers, Senior Director of Content and Engagement of PA Humanities, "the act of storytelling is the heart of what we do. What comes out of the stories is what dictates our work."

Organizations such as Appalshop and Barrio Alegría have been very purposeful about how storytelling works within the communities they serve. Appalshop uses a distinct approach to storytelling through a technique called "story circles," which was invented by Appalshop's Roadside Theater and its longtime collaborators the Free Southern Theater/Junebug Productions. Story circles are carefully facilitated, according to a set of rules developed over decades, which allow everyone's voice and perspective to be heard equally. When it works, it is a deeply meditative space where people feel heard in ways they may have never previously experienced, and share openly in ways they may have never previously shared. Through repetition, story circles reinforce feelings of trust.

Barrio Alegría illustrates how storytelling has been a "means to survival," for both individual community members as well as the city they call home. In 2011, Barrio Alegría's home base of Reading, Pennsylvania (a majority Latinx community) was declared the poorest city in the United States, based on census data showing more than 40% of the city's population living in poverty. Negative media portrayals such as this one fueled a palpable feeling of diminished self-worth within the community. This motivated Barrio to embrace storytelling, shared with both internal and external audiences, as a way to combat these damaging stigmas. Barrio works to celebrate the culture of Latin America as a point of pride, lifting up shared values of warmth, family, and generosity, through storytelling in both English and Spanish across a multitude of mediums. Creating stories together allows Reading residents to push back against negative perceptions, challenging preconceptions others might have about their community, shifting the way the city sees itself, and empowering a community to control its own narrative.



"In our work, justice relates to our practices of storytelling across the community—making sure we expand our audience and relationships beyond a narrow definition of what a 'historical society' can be. It means not basing our work around one-directional programs like lectures, but instead reorienting our work to collect stories from community members."

— Lindsay Houpt-Varner, (former) Community Engagement Director, Cumberland County Historical Society



## identity (and other terms)

Understanding, grappling with, and communicating about identity is at the core of this work.

While it is crucial to define and give an opportunity to discuss identity, many organizers and activists are critical of the term, as it contributes to silos and othering that can be detrimental to community building.

As Ben Fink (formerly) of Appalshop puts it, identity is best understood as a fluid, relational, as opposed to the static, inward-facing sense of identity that produces an “us versus them” mentality. Approached in this manner, communities can establish and cultivate a strong shared sense of who they are, while also building bridges with communities that may appear very different. That applies equally to national partnerships—connecting residents of the east Kentucky coalfields with communities in inner-city west Baltimore or the black belt of Alabama—as it does to local partnerships—connecting residents of two communities



“Our work is non-linear, cyclical, always looking to expand the ‘we.’”

— Ben Fink, (former) Founding Lead Organizer of the Performing Our Future Project, Appalshop

within a single county who have long regarded each other with distrust. In its work, Appalshop's main goal is to create the conditions for communities to self-define and discover commonalities with both their neighbors across town and communities of shared experience hundreds, or even thousands, of miles away. The success of these partnerships depends on participants grounding themselves in a deep sense of self and community: as Appalshop folks sometimes say, a bridge is only as strong as the posts on either end. Appalshop's longtime partners, including the Arch Social Community Network in West Baltimore and the Village of Arts and Humanities in Philadelphia, share a commitment to this kind of bridge-building. All three groups encourage a strong sense of self, but their identified commonalities help them work together to build agency and power.

Among the organizations interviewed; practitioners do not agree on the extent to which identity should inform humanities-based work. Some groups, including Chester Made, hold fast to the notion of identity, seeing it as critical to lifting up stories of place and bringing people together to renew community pride. Meanwhile, others such as IllumiNative shy away from the term.

For Chester Made (a moniker born out of the old statement "What Chester Makes, Makes Chester"), redefining and celebrating identity has been integral from the beginning of the initiative developed by PA Humanities in collaboration with local residents. Chester was once an industrial powerhouse that fell into economic decline, leading to job loss and diminished community pride. After years of experiencing these losses, getting residents excited about the future of the city required going back to the city's foundational definition of itself. By rallying around a sense of shared identity, Chester residents not only feel more connected to their home, but they also tell outsiders—future residents or visitors—that Chester can be a welcoming place for them, too.

In contrast, IllumiNative (an organization that amplifies contemporary and authentic Native voices) feels the term "identity," much like the humanities, to be overly academic. Instead, the organization prefers to use "ways of being." From its perspective, the issue with sharply defining identity is that it can contribute to othering, reinforcing the divide between Native Peoples and others that has led to centuries of disassociation. IllumiNative's goal is to spread knowledge about native culture in order to combat stereotypes and advocate for just treatment in media, education, and judicial practices—changing the outward facing narrative, rather than redefining from within.



*Through Chester Made, residents have looked to humanities practices to celebrate what makes the community great.*



## creating empathy and understanding

A key challenge for the humanities in this publicly facing context is positioning personal narratives to be more relevant and accessible to a diversity of audiences (and funding sources).

It is tempting to suggest that highlighting “commonality” is a way to combat this proclivity; however, to explicitly reduce unique experiences to the least common denominator in the name of “commonality” ignores how the humanities fundamentally positions us to hold space emotionally and cognitively for diverse points of view. The humanities cannot be summarized so simply into a series of shared experiences. There is great disparity among the experiences of humans based on country or place of origin, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. As discussed previously, these differences should not be diluted in an expedited attempt to promote accessibility or shared identity. The goal is, rather, to foster empathy and understanding across the human experience through uplifting and validating diverse stories, narratives, and perspectives. When you take an asset-approach with the humanities in community development, everyone’s strengths and narratives are valued so all can belong and thrive.



“What we’re trying to do is demystify the role of the artist and the role of the arts and to reintegrate arts back into culture and take it out of performance and into the idea of embodiment.”

— Carlton Turner, Artist, Agriculturalist, Researcher and Founder of the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production,

Across the board, all interviewed organizations regarded the exchange and creation of knowledge as crucial to enacting social change. This necessitates having the agency and resources to create new narratives, as well as access to publicly validated platforms from which to disseminate these truths beyond personal echo chambers. Without both, neither shared understanding and empathy or change and justice cannot be obtained.

In Detroit this materialized as a city appointed Chief Storyteller. Watershed conversations regarding identity, community, and social justice seldom seep across the divisive geographical and cultural boundaries that fragment humanity; Detroit’s government-financed foray into storytelling hopes to change this by publicly approaching such conversations from the perspective of a shared understanding—rather than a shared experience. Detroit’s Storytelling team is combating the long-perpetuated narrative of the existence of “two Detroits,” but instead of attempting to unify the city’s more than 200 neighborhoods around a single identity the team is highlighting individuality and diversity. Residents don’t need to—nor should they be able to—relate to each and every one of these narratives, but through exposure and conversation the hope is that a mutual respect and understanding is reached. Similarly, the work of the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (based in Utica Mississippi) deliberately avoids approaching Utica as one monolithic whole. They employ the same “story circle” concept cited by Appalshop to foster connections across generations, geographies, and religious denominations.

Leah Salgado, though hesitant to explicitly label the work of IllumiNative as the humanities, still sees value in the field, particularly when used to foster and sustain empathy. Collectively, “we need to learn about and understand different cultures. If we all had more empathy, we wouldn’t have as many of the problems we do today.” For IllumiNative, which is challenging negative narratives surrounding Native communities on a national level, the way to achieve this is through heightened visibility. Intolerance is sustained when minority voices are falsely depicted or omitted from mainstream platforms. Representation matters. When historically marginalized communities are adequately and publicly represented, their narratives are more widely validated and cultural exchanges, which foster empathy and understanding across disparate communities, are more likely to take place.



“We need to learn about and understand different cultures. If we all had more empathy, we wouldn’t have as many of the problems we do today.”

— Leah Salgado, Chief Impact Officer, IllumiNative

# III. What is this work trying to achieve?

The work of PA Humanities and its peer organizations strive to uphold the humanities as a dynamic process rather than a static definition: a way of doing—not just thinking—that fosters social change and promotes the betterment of humanity.

Grounded in storytelling, ideas of identity, and nurturing empathy, the previously outlined foundational themes for the applied humanities, this section identifies and explores the tangible ways a diversity of organizations are innovating what it means to work within the humanities. Through leadership development, organizational and community transformation, including non-traditional actors and new voices, prioritizing healing-centric approaches, and challenging harmful narratives these organizations are putting the humanities into action to achieve meaningful, sustainable change.

The following categories are by no means an exhaustive list of the tangible ways exchanges in knowledge can support social goods, but rather a collection of powerful trends identified in practice today.

## leadership development

Education has always been central to the humanities.

The most basic essence of the humanities is within academia, where education and the exchange of ideas is its reason for being. Modern, applied humanities work is reframing “education” as skill-building and a means to leadership development. The work aims to generate opportunities for power, expression, and wealth creation by passing the determination of self and future to community members themselves. Several organizations are shifting power into community centers, enabling long-oppressed residents to gain skills that can help them achieve success, leadership positions, and maintain networks to sustain learning. This work of skill- and relationship-building is distinctly humanistic, as it is building power through human connection and communication.



## Nexus Community Partners

Photo: Chai Lee

Nexus Community Partners is an organization based in Saint Paul, Minnesota; it predominantly serves the Twin Cities. Founded in 2004, its goal is to build power, skills, and engagement primarily in communities of color. Its work is centered around three pillars: authorship, leadership, and ownership. These three pillars are based upon how equitable and just societies should function to ensure that all members are afforded the opportunity to be:

- Authors of their own future;
- Leaders, representing themselves and others to advance equity;
- Generators of wealth, which they have the means to access and own.

Nexus does this work through funding and capacity-building support, leadership development training programs, and sharing its work with national and international audiences and like-minded organizations. Though the organization does not consider itself a part of the humanities sphere, its work with human and social capital shares similar attributes and values.

Nexus's Twin Cities Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute (BCLI), which places participants on publicly appointed boards and commissions throughout Minnesota, is an impressive example of leadership development and education. The BCLI, part of the leadership pillar of Nexus, grew out of a need that was observed in participants of other programs and grantees—that boards and commissions held the real power and decision-making capable of influencing



“We say ‘build’ but it means really ‘recognizing’ power. Working in terms of social and human capital really means allowing people to see their own power in themselves.”

— *Avi Viswanathan, (former) Director of the Community Engagement Institute, Nexus Community Partners*

community development, and that many of Nexus' participants lacked the resources, skills, and confidence to be a part of those organizations. In response, Nexus created a program and curriculum to prepare a new set of individuals to be a part of that equation. This was a departure for Nexus, which had previously been a regranting organization. In making this shift, Nexus acted upon perceived needs to make a more transformational impact in the communities it served and was enabled to create this program with support from local and national funders.



Photo: Nexus Community Partners

Photo: Eduardo Stanley, ArneVism Fellowship

The program is seven months long, and fellows (as participants are known) meet twice weekly within that timeframe. The curriculum includes targeted writing skills (resolutions, etc.), messaging and media, and political skills developed through interactive training. Building relationships is at the core of the training. Being a part of the experience, sharing challenges and milestones, and then being able to connect with networks in the long run are major assets. Fellows are also given a stipend for their involvement. In 2019, the program graduated its sixth cohort, bringing its alumni to eighty-five.

The success of the program has given rise to several other training programs at Nexus, including the North Star Black Collaborative—a fellowship program for African American and Black folks interested in developing or furthering their cooperative businesses and ideas—allowing participants to connect with fellow community members, bring their own ideas, and build ownership.

Nexus has also launched an additional cohort model in leadership development focused on evaluation and community engagement. Through each of these programs, it is able to expand the circle of people capable of creating their own path to success and serve as leaders for others. Learning evaluating skills allows communities to measure the success of programs, through their own lens and language, thus impacting how and for whom stories are shared.

*Nexus acted upon perceived needs to make a more transformational impact in the communities it served and was enabled to create this program with support from local and national funders.*



## Pan Valley Institute

Founded in 1998 as a program of the American Friends Service Committee, the Pan Valley Institute (PVI) is a popular education center located in Fresno, California in the heart of the state's Central Valley. The Valley is home to large immigrant and refugee populations that struggle with experiences of social isolation, economic inequality, marginalization, and cultural discrimination. PVI's mission is to accompany and support these communities in their efforts to build a productive and enriching place for themselves in their new home. Since its foundation, it has grown not only in geographic reach, extending to other Central Valley counties such as Merced, Madera, and Tulare, but also in the ethnic communities that it serves. At first, it worked mostly with Mexican immigrants who had come to the Central Valley to work in the agriculture industry. Today, PVI has extended its programs to include a broad spectrum of new Americans, demonstrating the shared experiences that exist across typical cultural boundaries. PVI recognizes these shared commonalities of immigrant communities, which are often borne with prolonged trauma and social injustices, and brings these groups together to heal, to learn, and to ultimately strengthen their collective voice as means to increase political representation and reform. Though different, groups are enabled to channel these shared experiences into greater power and belonging for the whole.



“Ultimately, celebrating cultural backgrounds for immigrants and refugees is a political act. We work to make connections between them – a broader perspective of what it means to live in such a diverse community as the Central Valley. Through the healing process, they build a sense of belonging and then can rise to leadership.”

— Myrna Martinez Nateras, Program Director,  
Pan Valley Institute of the American Friends  
Service Committee (AFSC)



Photo: Tudor Stanley

*Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship (TCOFP) fellows are brought together to help their communities find a sense of belonging through the sharing of arts and cultural expression, which could ultimately be channeled into increased confidence, social inclusion, and change.*

Recognizing the struggle for rights and feeling of invisibility that existed among many immigrant communities, PVI sought a way to amplify immigrant participation and influence. They established their signature leadership development program, the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP), in 2011. TCOFP fellows are brought together to help their communities find a sense of belonging through the sharing of arts and cultural expression, which could ultimately be channeled into increased confidence, social inclusion and change. From 2011 to 2017, TCOFP graduated 24 fellows, which indirectly supported over 200 community members who participated in the learning groups involved in the program.

Through TCOFP, fellows learn the basis of popular education, participatory action and cultural organizing. Tasks like completing a community assessment, or hosting cultural exchanges with those inside and outside of their communities show TCOFP fellows the positive results and connections that are brought about through the amplification of shared values and the dissemination of information. The first cohort of fellows created an arts and culture series which was held in four cities across the Central Valley, showcasing the work the fellows had produced and spreading the message that cultural expression could lead to widespread appreciation and empowerment. Subsequent fellows, with backgrounds ranging from Mexican to Hmong to Syrian, used different tactics to strengthen the identity of their individual groups through ideas such as showcasing indigenous art, to a photography exhibit of where people lived, to a cookbook of native recipes. The program enables participants to work within their own communities to understand key issues through the tools of participatory action and translate them into programs that will build pride and demonstrate to others the value of immigrants, and let immigrants themselves no longer be hidden.

PVI has recently put out publications that share the history of the program, and a series of policy recommendations that can help organizations with similar aims use their proven mechanisms to build empowerment through cultural celebrations and shared understanding.



Photo: Reading Eagle

## transformation (of place, organizations and processes)

Emergent leaders in the humanities in action are critical, imaginative, and willing to challenge the status quo.

Put simply, they are transformative. By confronting both explicitly and implicitly oppressive structures of power, these organizations act as catalysts for meaningful social change.

Such transformational thinking is needed across every level of organizational strata. At the community level, this means amplifying the voices of communities who have historically been denied agency and excluded from humanities-centered conversations. In this context, transformation is about changing attitudes and perceptions within the communities themselves, empowering members to feel capable, worthy, and in control of their own narratives. To achieve sustainable change, community transformation must also be matched with widespread organizational transformation. This type of transformational thinking arises when community development organizations and their philanthropic partners acknowledge the flaws inherent in existing frameworks and policies—flaws that actively reinforce the inequity that community transformation strives to overcome—and take the initiative to establish more inclusive practices.

Organizational transformation recognizes the work of community transformation by supporting new voices with flexible resources that encourage the exploration of ideas; this work prioritizes the building of relationships over the achievement of a set of discrete deliverables. Transformative organizations are taking ownership of the humanities and redefining what this concept can and should mean in the twenty-first century.



## Barrio Alegría

Photo: Natalie Kolb

Barrio Alegría is a primarily volunteer-run community development organization that uses art and storytelling as tools for transformative, multicultural engagement and education in Reading, Pennsylvania. While Barrio originated as a dance company, founder and Executive Director Daniel Egusquiza was inspired to expand programming in response to the city's STAR evaluation (a national program that assesses a community's overall sustainability). Reading scored the lowest in the categories of equity and empowerment. Egusquiza realized that his community was struggling with self-limiting beliefs and saw that Barrio had an opportunity to change this. Before the residents of Reading, a majority Latinx community, could be empowered to enact change collectively, they needed to be individually empowered to feel valued and capable; they needed to be liberated from deep-seated oppression. Barrio now works to create this transformational change by instilling pride in heritage, ownership of narratives, and faith in self.

For Barrio, storytelling—expressed through a diversity of artistic outlets—has become a way of survival, of confronting the negative stereotypes and narratives perpetuated about its community and changing perceptions through positive representation. This includes championing bi-lingual and Spanish storytelling.

*For Barrio, storytelling—expressed through a diversity of artistic outlets—has become a way of survival, of confronting the negative stereotypes and narratives perpetuated about its community and changing perceptions through positive representation.*



Photo: Margo Reed

For many Latinx communities, there are stigmas associated with speaking Spanish. Latinx Americans have been made to feel a sense of otherness and inadequacy for speaking their native language, which dissuades them from civic participation and diminishes cultural pride. By encouraging expression, reading, and teaching in Spanish, Barrio is empowering its community to see a knowledge of the Spanish language (regardless of fluency in English) as a gift to be celebrated, not a burden to carry. Storytelling, communication, and sharing are central pillars for Barrio as a community transformation organization. By documenting and sharing stories through dance, poetry, photography, and community service, Barrio validates underrepresented voices and combats the self-limiting beliefs that have been reinforced in Reading by years of discrimination and inequity.

Barrio has even adopted a form of storytelling, the Most Significant Change, as its method of reporting progress back to funders. The Most Significant Change prioritizes personal anecdotes and narratives over statistical analysis as measures of success and impact. These initiatives have given the Reading community a sense of self-worth and agency, which they are utilizing to build a stronger, more sustainable, and inclusive city.



“Barrio is trying to liberate community members from internal self limitation. In doing dance and theater people realized the process was changing them and giving them a sense of ownership and pride. Changing people’s mentality of what they can personally do is how they transform the community.”

— Daniel Egusquiza, Founder and Executive Director, Barrio Alegría



## LISC Philadelphia

Photo: Neal Santos

Founded in 1979 by the Ford Foundation, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) is a well-established non-profit organization that leverages corporate, government, and philanthropic resources for the equitable development of underserved communities. Across Philadelphia and its region, decades of intentional disinvestment and systematic barriers have created inequitable futures for our neighbors. For years, the Philadelphia LISC office used the organization's standard grant application when advertising for new opportunities—that is, until recent community feedback challenged this standardized practice as undemocratic.

One of LISC's pillars for community development is an investment in creative placemaking, utilizing expressions of art and culture to empower people to build vibrant, resilient, and socially connected communities. Such investment opportunities were theoretically open to any community-based organization or local artist within designated neighborhoods, but it became apparent that by circulating a standard grant application, a number of eligible participants, chiefly artists and organizations without 501c3 designation, felt excluded. When grant opportunities rely on standardized and existing policies, applicants are often successful based on clever writing and acquired organizational knowledge, rather than the expression of inventive ideas. This realization



“People don’t use the word transformation enough. There needs to be more transformational thinking in grant making, more imagination and possibility in human potential.”

— *Melissa Kim, (former) Deputy Director, LISC Philadelphia*



Photo: Jared Gruenwald

prompted LISC Philadelphia to reevaluate what it meant when it talked about equitable community development. Eventually, the organization redesigned its grantmaking process to align with its organizational mission. LISC Philadelphia's grant applications are now more straightforward, with less cumbersome requirements. The applications place a greater emphasis on an iterative design process—learning through doing—and holistic measures of success. LISC is willing to invest in the exploration of ideas and community building instead of requiring all projects to articulate a set of fixed deliverables.

Overall, LISC feels Philadelphia communities have been receptive to these changes. By allowing for more flexibility and freedom in the grant process, a wider range of voices are being heard and communities' individual needs are being recognized. Grant writing, as it currently exists, utilizes an exclusive code few people have been provided the resources to crack. Left unchallenged, current philanthropic frameworks reinforce existing power structures and continue to exclude those who were never included. By transforming the way the organization evaluates project applications and implementation, LISC Philadelphia has begun to challenge what equity and access look like in the grantmaking process.



Photo: Appalshop/Appalachian Media Institute

## decentering the expert/non-traditional actors

Much like the shifts that are happening in leadership development, the humanities are also seeing changes in the actors who lead humanities-based work.

For several organizations doing groundbreaking work, community members are the educators and experts. Professionals working in the applied humanities aim to bring people together in a setting of shared power, where everyone's expertise is recognized and valued. The expert is no longer the organizer, but rather the contributor. As this power dynamic is reinforced, community members gain greater agency and themselves take on leadership roles. Increasingly, this work is being facilitated by artists, historians, and community organizers working outside of traditional institutions. They are working on the ground, alongside community members, rather than in a large institution or "ivory tower" that can be seen as isolated or unapproachable.

The chosen case studies demonstrate how the humanities are becoming a great equalizer between traditional "experts" and those with lived experience—between institutions and everyday life.



## Appalshop

Photo: Appalshop/Appalachian Media Institute

Appalshop is a nonprofit arts and media center based in Whitesburg, Kentucky. The organization has been working in the region for more than fifty years to elevate the stories and people of Appalachia and other allied communities through a diversity of media—including filmmaking, theater, music, radio, and archiving. While its work remains rooted in the coalfields of rural central Appalachia, it has expanded its network and now works in partnership with communities and community-led organizations across the country that share common experiences and values. It is a well-established organization that demonstrates the power of arts and culture to create meaningful change through building power and working towards justice, and serves as a model to others doing this work.

Based in the methodology of civil rights organizers, Appalshop seeks to strengthen what it calls “community centers of power,” defined as “organizations of, by, and for the people in a given place.” Community centers of power can be formal organizations, legally incorporated and owning their own space, or informal networks of neighbors getting together where they can. Whatever their form, it is only through community centers of power that communities can authentically determine their own future by developing their capacity for voice, agency, and ownership. They then move forward with “what needs to be done,” rejecting traditional sectors (e.g. transportation, art, economic development, public health) that are the known constructs of the funding and professional world. Community centers of power are sector-agnostic.

Through this community-driven model, Appalshop has been a pioneer in challenging top-down models of expertise. Appalshop’s producers work alongside those whose experiences are told through their stories and media, who often become long-term partners. Appalshop’s work continually reinforces connections between community centers of power so that, once established, connections live on beyond the duration of a program or a grant—this investment of time and interest keeps relationships, and shared understanding, intact. Those relationships then become the guide in a community, not the “professionals,” so the definition of expertise and the center of power is effectively shifted.



“The only way we can win is to build relationships across barriers people often see as insurmountable. Identity can be made and re-made based on how we make meaning together and how we understand ourselves and our neighbors. When people have the opportunity to make their own meaning, they can work together to resist being exploited.”

— Ben Fink, (former) Founding Lead Organizer of the Performing Our Future Project, Appalshop



## Greater Carlisle Community Heart & Soul

Photo: Greater Carlisle Heart & Soul Project

PA Humanities launched PA Community Heart & Soul with three pilot sites in 2016, and now has expanded the program to 14 locations. The relationship PA Humanities has forged with the Orton Family Foundation and Community Heart & Soul® is an expression of its commitment to create a new, more inclusive and equitable relationship among and between similarly missioned philanthropic organizations. As it is deployed by PA Humanities, the resident-driven community planning model lays out a four-phase, step-by-step process, which empowers residents to build a shared path to the future based on the unique character of each community and the shared sense of community that is uncovered through the work. In Greater Carlisle Pennsylvania, the PA Heart & Soul project was led by the Cumberland County Historical Society (CCHS). Formally established in 1987, CCHS has long been a “traditional” historical society, showcasing the dominant history of the county through its facilities and programs. In the minds of many, CCHS is the historical society for Carlisle only, a perspective that CCHS is actively trying to change.

*As it is deployed by PA Humanities, the resident-driven community planning model lays out a four-phase, step-by-step process, which empowers residents to build a shared path to the future based on the unique character of each community and the shared sense of community that is uncovered through the work.*

In order to implement the Heart & Soul model, CCHS had to make a concentrated shift to demonstrate how history, humanities, outreach, and placekeeping intersect. Under the leadership of former project director Lindsay Varner, who served as the organization's community outreach director, CCHS used the Heart & Soul opportunity to test how the historical society could be more relevant in the present. It wanted to get people thinking about the past without framing the conversation as a history lecture.

Through this project, CCHS did an immense amount of story gathering and oral history collecting. In a way, this was decentering the locus of history, recognizing and validating broad swaths of the community, rather than just those towns and peoples whose histories had long characterized CCHS' holdings and programs. Stories were collected by posting flyers in the local library. CCHS intentionally kept the process simple so that people could easily participate in their casual visits to the library.

Project organizers made sure to go back to the community at every stage of the process to share and agree upon what they heard and communicate next steps. Decentering the expert could not be a one-time occurrence in the process: it had to be a constant check-in, used to determine and confirm a shared vision. The work evolved from being one-directional history "education" or interpretation, to a collaborative narrative oriented around the histories of the community as a whole and those who chose to share their stories through this exchange.

According to Elizabeth Myrick and Rachel Mosher-Williams in their participatory learning study of Greater Carlisle Heart & Soul and two other PA Humanities pilot communities, this "project is bringing to light the ways past, current, and emerging narratives help communities shape what it means to live in this place, at this time, within this context." For them a key lesson from their learning: "Now may be the time when the humanities could prove most strategic and germane. While differences in power and privilege are present almost everywhere, the specific histories and players within each community must be well understood to address, rather than ignore, or replicate these dynamics."<sup>12</sup>



"Now may be the time when the humanities could prove most strategic and germane. While differences in power and privilege are present almost everywhere, the specific histories and players within each community must be well understood to address, rather than ignore, or replicate these dynamics."

— From *Humanities-Based Community Development in Pennsylvania: Insights from PHC's Heart & Soul Project*, Elizabeth Myrick & Rachel Mosher-Williams



Photo: Greater Carlisle Heart & Soul Project



Photo: Pamela Peniston

## healing-centered practices

Humanities -based work striving to enact social change is often oriented towards healing-centric approaches,

in which the traumas marginalized and oppressed communities have experienced—as both individuals and a collective whole across generations—are explicitly acknowledged and contextualized but not used to solely define said communities.

While causes of community trauma can be diverse, they are often correlated with longstanding oppressive and inequitable realities, such as racism, which allow external forces to erase communities' culture and identity.<sup>13</sup> For many communities, these experiences have become absorbed into “the way things are,” and have resulted in lack of agency, engagement, and general distrust of government or professionals that may target these communities with needs-based perspectives. For the sake of this argument, communities may be defined as geographic, cultural, or experiential. The applied humanities provide a forum to unpack definitions of self and community through story-telling; with a healing-centric lens, individuals are enabled to confront longstanding trauma and be active participants in restoring their own well-being.<sup>14</sup> This practice makes space for communities to identify concerns that, if resolved, would improve the quality of life and access to resources—or, in other words, achieve justice.

It must be acknowledged that many of the issues, policies, and practices contributing to the marginalization of specific communities over time still exist, and myriad barriers still prevent true reconciliation or equitable distribution of wealth and privilege across communities. This conversation became exceptionally present in the minds of many in Summer 2020, and ongoing, yet much work remains to be done. The humanities can provide meaningful examples of actionable ways to begin to work towards justice. By acknowledging the sources of community trauma and providing the space for self-expression and healing, the humanities are doing valuable work to build skills, develop individual and communal agency, and foster discussions to identify a path forward.



## Queer Cultural Center

Photo: Marcella Sanchez

The Queer Cultural Center (Qcc), founded in 1994, is a San Francisco based organization concerned with uplifting queer arts, artists, and culture of all disciplines and backgrounds—especially as they relate to women, trans people, people of color, the disabled or disenfranchised. Qcc was created to shatter the notion that there is any singular type of queer person, for queer and non-queer audiences alike; however, the work of Qcc quickly shifted to focus exclusively on queer audiences.

The queer community has the advantage (and sometimes challenge) of including people from all racial, ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds, among other intersecting identity formations. Qcc felt strongly about providing an open, supportive space in which to express the multiplicity of queer identities—empowering community members to productively address the different kinds of trauma and oppression they face, while still championing their successes and strengths. Those immediately outside of the queer community are always welcome to participate in and learn from Qcc programming, but the most important thing is that queer artists are given the opportunity to present their stories to their own people. This practice promotes healing by validating the artists (both their work and their experiences), uplifting the communities with which the artists identify, and fostering greater understanding across disparate sectors of the larger queer community. An example of such work, provided by founding member and Artistic Director Pamela Peniston, is “Transforming Community,” a program created explicitly to bring trans and homonormative people together in an open dialog. “Transforming Community” provided a platform for authentic and honest expression that challenged both sides to think with more empathy, acknowledge each other’s truths, and through this process, ultimately build meaningful connections. By supporting these types of learning exchanges Qcc embraces a wholistic, asset-based approach for defining queer identities.



“Storytelling is the most powerful instrument of freedom, justice, identity, and strength.”

— Pamela Peniston, *Founding Member and (former) Artistic Director, Queer Cultural Center*



Photo: Dave Le

*Not everyone can be showcased everywhere, but everyone needs to have a place to be showcased.*

Since 1998 Qcc has hosted the National Queer Arts Festival. Peniston attributed much of the festival's prolonged success to the larger queer community, who year after year provide Qcc with feedback and suggestions. Only through seeking out new themes and recruiting fresh artistic perspectives can the National Queer Arts Festival remain relevant, "not everyone can be showcased everywhere, but everyone needs to have a place to be showcased." The results speak for themselves; most audience members cite the subject matter as their primary reason for attending any given event. In addition to its robust programming and grants, Qcc maintains a digital archive that documents important Queer art and artists from the perspective of the Bay Area. The archive is by no means an exhaustive catalog of queer culture but serves the purpose of uplifting notable contributions and building positive visibility for the queer community. Such visibility not only promotes understanding and acceptance but can be a lifeline to members of the queer community who have been prohibited from claiming their true identities due to discriminatory prejudices. This was particularly true when Qcc first launched in the 1990s; there was such a dearth of outlets for queer culture, Qcc's website was inundated with visitors hungry for historical information, stories, and connections.





## Mississippi Center for Cultural Production

Photo: Julian Ranking

***MCCP uses the story circle, made famous by the Free Southern Theater, as a way to ground community narratives and connect community stories, building a mutual appreciation for trauma and strife.***

The Mississippi Center for Cultural Production (MCCP) is an organization based in Utica, Mississippi and run by Carlton Turner and Brandi Turner. Established in 2017, the group is still young, but prior to creating this organization in his hometown, Carlton Turner was the Executive Director of Alternate ROOTS, a social justice-oriented community arts and culture organization based in Atlanta. In his own words, “[MCCP] works to harness the power of stories to improve the condition of communities.” It uses the arts and humanities not only to

philosophize about social justice but to imagine, and then manifest, the world views and the physical places in which community members want to live. Turner points to the influence of civil rights leaders active in the area during his upbringing, which has led him to be an agent for change in his own community, and to seek

justice for those who may not see a path forward.

Creating a welcoming environment where healing can take place is critical to the work of MCCP, as its work must start with and acknowledge the social injustices that have affected the lives of community members. MCCP employs the practices common in many humanities-focused organizations: storytelling, creating empathy and understanding, and sharing identity. MCCP uses the story circle, made famous by the Free Southern Theater, as a way to ground community narratives and connect community stories, building a mutual appreciation for trauma and strife. Sharing these experiences allows people to see themselves in others, akin to therapy practices. Once a foundation of shared experiences



Photo: SIPP Culture

has been processed and laid as the groundwork, participants are able to shift how they may have seen neighbors or “others:” they can form new relationships, be inspired by the opportunity for change, and begin conversations about justice.

For MCCP, food is seen as a common denominator. All its programs are about food and story, and participants have come to expect both. When they want to have a conversation about food access—which became a pressing issue when a major grocery store recently closed in the community—MCCP brought people together around their shared memories of food and cultivation. Many residents are only a few generations away from the years in which the community had to sustain itself on the land. When people put their nametag on, they were also prompted to write their favorite fruit or vegetable. This sparked conversations, like “Oh, we used to get peaches from down the road,” and others comment that built shared memory. Seemingly insignificant, this spark can ignite a deeper conversation about justice and healing, which can spin the momentum forward towards action.

MCCP recognizes that the road to comprehensive justice reform is long, and the funding or political will may not be there to drastically shift the way community members experience life in the present day. However, through each cultural program, and through each life that they touch, they are inspiring people to transform the way they conceive of their own past, and how they can reframe their community through the lens of a better future, bolstered by peers and empathetic leaders. Through this healing-centered work, MCCP is a model of a community-based organization that is a constant and dependable safe space for conversation, and an agent for positive change.



“Once a foundation of shared experiences has been processed and laid as the groundwork, participants are able to shift how they may have seen neighbors or ‘others:’ they can form new relationships, be inspired by the opportunity for change, and begin conversations about justice.”

— Carlton Turner, Artist, Agriculturalist,  
Researcher and Founder of the Mississippi  
Center for Cultural Production,



Photo: Illuminative

## changing the narrative and ownership

The humanities represent a collective interpretation of the world and how it works.

This interpretation is crafted from individual stories woven together to form narratives. Through validation, certain narratives become dominant world views (expressed realities) imbued with power and authority. It is vitally important to ask how, why, and by whom these dominant narratives were constructed, and thus acknowledge their culpability in the exclusion, exploitation, and erasure of marginalized communities.

Narrative change is the process by which historically marginalized and underrepresented communities reclaim widespread ownership of their personal narratives, cultures, and lived experiences. In order for these truths to become validated narratives—in order for the perceived dominant narrative to change—meaningful knowledge transfers between diverse communities must take place at a wide scale.

*IllumiNative's reports like "An Advocate's Guide to Supporting Indigenous People's Day" are toolkits to fight against the invisibility, bias and racism that impacts Native communities.*



## IllumiNative

Photo: Illuminative

IllumiNative is a Native-created and -led nonprofit initiative based in Tulsa, Oklahoma working to change the narrative surrounding Native communities by amplifying authentic, contemporary Native voices in response to the damaging myths and stereotypes still being perpetuated about their communities. Deputy Director Leah Salgado emphasizes that for Native communities, invisibility is a significant contributor to the sustenance of these negative narratives.<sup>15</sup> The most successful way to combat negative narratives is through positive and accurate storytelling, but when stories are expressly omitted, people use false, often harmful information to fill knowledge gaps.

This makes visibility a vital necessity for enacting narrative change and securing justice. It is only when marginalized communities can access visible, public platforms, when they can productively engage with those who have never truly learned about their culture, that positive narratives can be reinforced in sustainable ways. Armed with this knowledge, education reform is at the forefront of IllumiNative’s mission. In the past few years, a handful of states have passed legislation mandating the holistic teaching of Native Peoples’ histories and cultures in public schools, but implementation has been difficult. The dearth of knowledge around Native culture is so vast that the government officials who oversee education legislation know just as little as the children for whom they are designing the curricula. IllumiNative provides resources and funding to grassroots organizations across the nation to lobby for further educational reforms and to hold governing bodies accountable for proper implementation.

Embedded in narrative change are ideas of identity, or ways of being. Not only have Native communities faced generations of violence and discrimination, erasure has become a modern form of bias against Native Peoples. By seeking narrative change, IllumiNative seeks justice. They seek to fight oppression and earn the freedom that humanity should afford all people—to simply exist, just as they are.



“We’re combating negative narratives and stereotypes surrounding native communities. Research has found that the most important thing is to provide accurate and positive examples, stories, and information. Then people won’t have to fill gaps in their knowledge with false, harmful narratives.”

— Leah Salgado, Chief Impact Officer, IllumiNative



## Chester Made

Photo: Greg Irvin

Chester Made is an active, multi-year project built on the arts and culture community of Chester, Pennsylvania, envisioned to mobilize local assets as a force for community revitalization. A signature, long-term project of PA Humanities, Chester Made began with community members—including artist Devon Walls of the Artist Warehouse—who were already active in self-organization and cultural expression. Central to the vision of the project has been how artists and residents have positioned it with PA Humanities around the theme of reclaiming, repurposing, and rebuilding. “What Chester Makes, Makes Chester” is a slogan from the city’s industrial past and present – a point of pride of what it means to be “Chester Made” and build your community on your own terms. “Ownership of property is a crucial part of that vision,” says Devon. “In a city that is often seen as notorious for its crime rates, we need ownership. We cleaned up the trash. We started getting attention. And we are not stopping here. We have to start believing in who we are, and we have to believe that our neighborhoods are worth building.” It’s an aesthetic that adopts and honors its forgotten treasures of the past and transforms them into something new, owned and controlled by the local community and its cultural values. Now in its eighth year, the initiative has involved a large collective of public and private funders and individual contributors, including Ulysses “Butch” Slaughter, the former project organizer on the ground.



“In a city that is often seen as notorious for its crime rates, we need ownership. We cleaned up the trash. We started getting attention. And we are not stopping here. We have to start believing in who we are, and we have to believe that our neighborhoods are worth building.”

— Devon Walls, Chester Artist and Developer

PA Humanities began the project with an “asset-based approach” to community development. As with other humanities-based projects, story gathering, and sharing was at the forefront. In 2015, project organizers held story gathering sessions throughout Chester, collecting a wide representation of stories and surveys that were then used to create a cultural asset map, depicting areas of shared pride and significance.<sup>16</sup> The map became a tool to promote and protect key areas, develop programs to facilitate job growth and development, and craft policy changes to support these goals.

In its progression, Chester Made has continued to create meaning and adapt to the changing priorities of community members, including shifts in politics and giving people a chance to air out concerns. For example, when community members expressed trepidation about safety, justice, censorship, rights, and how policing affects them, Chester Made facilitated a public forum for this conversation called “Policing the Truth.” By encouraging an open discussion around these topics, Chester Made validated community concerns and worked to find new solutions.

Investing in Chester Made marked an important move by PA Humanities to shift the conversation around the city from that of a problem to be solved, to a rich community of stories, people, and strengths to be shared and celebrated. This was seen in the 2018 Broken Pieces program which brought local youth and families together through painting and other healing practices to demonstrate that what may appear as “broken” can be turned into beauty. The three tenets taught through these series of workshops—reclaim, rebuild, and repurpose—are what Chester Made strives to achieve for the city itself. As it repurposes land and resources, transforms abandoned buildings into galleries, and makes public spaces into art, Chester Made encourages community members to get involved and shows the city and outsiders alike that there is hope for the future. “Whose History is it Anyway?” was a panel discussion that flipped the narrative of who was telling the story of Chester, and invited voices of the community to recount their own histories—rather than those of traditional experts. This debate, uncomfortable at times, enabled real transformation in the way that Chester residents were viewing their own history and their ability to shape their future community and voice.

Each of these programs inspire pride and demonstrate that things are changing for Chester. They encourage people not to sit around and wait for things to get done. Rather, they can be empowered to do it themselves (with appropriate funding), and with a network of support that they’ve encountered through this process, and the positive momentum it has created.



*Project organizers held story gathering sessions throughout Chester, collecting a wide representation of stories and surveys that were then used to create a cultural asset map, depicting areas of shared pride and significance.*



“We’ve got to start listening to people outside downtown and midtown. When we look at other cities, like Portland and Austin and especially Brooklyn, people have moved into these cities and then they start dictating to the older residents about what they think they need... We have to start treating them like our neighbours.”

— Aaron Foley, *journalist and Detroit Chief Storyteller*

## Detroit Chief Storyteller

Photo: Kenneth B. Foley

In 2017, the city of Detroit appointed Aaron Foley, a journalist and native Detroiter, to be its inaugural Chief Storyteller. Housed in the city’s Media Services Department, Foley and his team of videographers, writers, and photographers strove to create a platform where residents could learn about each other across geographic and cultural boundaries.

The concept of a Chief Storyteller arose as a response to concerns around city perceptions. Detroit was receiving increased attention for new improvements and investments, but coverage of these positive, comeback stories skewed heavily white—despite Detroit being a majority-minority city. A key goal for this first-of-its-kind government position is to uplift and validate narratives of marginalized, underrepresented Detroiters (particularly from LBGT, minority, and immigrant communities) whose voices have been historically omitted from or misrepresented in mainstream media. Foley uses the term “psychological



Photo: City of Detroit Government

gentrification” to describe the effects of uneven representation on longtime city residents; representation matters and denying communities this right is just as damaging as appropriating their physical spaces. When minority communities cultural exchanges, which facilitate empathy and understanding across disparate communities, are more likely to take place.

The Detroit government’s foray into storytelling is still in the early stages. The team’s existence is primarily virtual, and they’re struggling to reach a wider audience, but none of this has dissuaded other cities from adopting similar initiatives. During his time in Detroit, representatives from Atlanta, Denver, Tampa, and Baton Rouge all reached out to Foley with a desire to emulate his position in their own governments. He was quick to caution: “It’s still experimental, I can’t promise what’s worked for us will work for anyone else. In fact, I’m not even sure what’s worked for us yet.” But there is no denying the attraction of investing in a platform capable of sparking citywide discussions on identity, community, and justice. These conversations so seldom seep across the geographic and cultural boundaries that divide cities; perhaps framing them in the context of a shared understanding—rather than a shared experience—was the key Foley and his team landed on as they worked to spotlight each and every one of Detroit’s more than 200 neighborhoods. The role of a Chief Storyteller is not to mold the experiences of all residents into one narrative, but rather to lift up, through equal exposure and opportunity, the narratives of all residents. Through his work, Foley highlighted the multiplicity of experiences, histories, and identities that contribute to a singular city.

*The role of a Chief Storyteller is not to mold the experiences of all residents into one narrative, but rather to lift up, through equal exposure and opportunity, the narratives of all residents.*

# IV. Current Realities of Doing this Work

## what do the humanities actually fund?

Nearly every organization spoke to the difficulty of sustained funding.

This difficulty was expressed both through challenges in finding sources of funds for the type of work they are doing (a few organizations pointed to ArtPlace, which sunsetted at the end of 2020), as well as having the adequate organizational capacity to compete for grants. In many cases, organization or program heads are writing the grants while simultaneously running the projects.

Part of the reason many of the organizations were hesitant to label the work they do as the humanities is because humanities sector funding and support has been difficult, if not impossible, for them to secure. As Pamela Peniston (Qcc) explained, “generally, the grants for the arts were larger and more robust and open to us rather than the Humanities funders. [...] Most so-called Humanities Funders were more concerned with Western Civilization (i.e. white) approaches to the arts and historic visions not contemporary, not People of Color, and certainly not queer. Although the needle has moved on this, the definition of Humanities often keeps more groups out than it admits.”

Another observation emphasized by Leah Salgado (IllumiNative) was the difficulty of finding funding to simply sustain projects. Salgado specifically observed that many grants are intended to solve a problem, starting with a deficit and enabling funders to show that they made a “real impact” with measurable results. This mentality underscores the issue inherent in grantmaking: a need to report progress and transformation using data. There is a blatant lack of funding sources that are content to maintain the good work organizations are already doing. Day to day operations, project maintenance, and staff capacity are essential (and costly) components for achieving meaningful and sustained impacts. If an organization is lacking in any of these areas, even securing funds for projects with measurable outcomes becomes increasingly difficult. A shift in funding philosophies is desperately needed to achieve true equitability; a reality that has grown more pressing in the wake of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movements.

This being said, practices are beginning to change—albeit gradually. Foundation leadership is shifting to younger, more diverse generations that understand the need for social impact investing to achieve equitable community development. The Ford Foundation was mentioned as one to watch for forward-thinking



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— Pamela Peniston, *Founding Member and (former) Artistic Director, Queer Cultural Center*

approaches to this type of philanthropy. PA Humanities itself recently navigated an organizational shift to invest more directly in community driven projects, recognizing that this kind of investment must be a commitment of both finances and time. Though this shift was not without strife—PA Humanities acknowledges changing the power structures inherent in private sector funding is a monumental task, to date their biggest impact has been in partnership with state agencies and progressive partners like Spring Point Partners—PA Humanities hopes to lead by example.

Now a self-described advocacy organization with demonstration projects, PA Humanities is a model for what the future of philanthropy can be. The COVID-19 pandemic tested the viability of their new approach to philanthropy and its emphasis on deeper relationships with grantees based on empathy and community-driven projects. Unlike some more traditionally hierarchical funders, the organization was able to leverage its deepening, on-the-ground relationships to assess the needs of the cultural sector and its workers. When the state first shut down in 2020, PA Humanities was positioned to know and respond to the emerging challenges. It quickly built a statewide network with its regional partners, hosted educational webinars, reallocated its program funding for emergency grants, and held crisis working groups to develop more recovery grants and cross-sector learning opportunities. Recognizing its leadership, the Federation of State Humanities Councils asked former Chester Made Project Manager Ulysses “Butch” Slaughter from PA Humanities to speak to the House Committee on Appropriations on “The Effects of COVID-19 on Arts and Humanities Organizations” in March of 2021. With the support of the NEH, PA Humanities was able to provide approximately \$2 million in grants over two years to support the growth and recovery of Pennsylvania’s humanities organizations and program practitioners in community development, creative placemaking, and civic engagement, reeling from a 37% decline in overall budgets, 34% decline in revenues, and a laying off of 22% of full-time staff. In addition to funds, PA Humanities is partnering with grantees to build a community of practice and mutual support network to help all learn, share their talents, and stay strong through this challenging time.

Evaluation methods are changing too. The Most Significant Change technique, which prioritizes stories over data when assessing project impacts and successes, has been championed and adopted by both Barrio Alegría and PA Humanities. Most Significant Change is a participatory evaluation method that privileges on-the-ground participants and necessitates that funders not only share power but be receptive to being evaluated themselves. It is a shared learning experience designed to be iterative. However, most organizations still rely on surveys and numerical reporting, and grantees often lack the capacity to manage such evaluations. A more robust, inclusive manner of evaluation is still needed within the field. In 2015, Nexus Community Partners published the resource “Everyone is An Evaluator,” which offers a step-by-step community-engagement approach to evaluation. This approach, which empowers community members to evaluate themselves and their work, is commendable; it should be shared broadly and adopted by more organizations and funders as recommended protocol.<sup>17</sup>

**LEARNING NETWORK: PUTTING IT TOGETHER**

PA Humanities will curate and manage a resource library for topics of interest. **Building: Weekly starting February 2022**

PA Humanities will form three grantee roundtables to learn about the topics you selected as most important. **Launching: March 2022**

PA Humanities will create a PA SHARP Google Group for networking and resource and idea-sharing. **Coming: February 2022**

*In 2021, PA Humanities developed the PA SHARP Learning Network to build a cross-sector, statewide community focused on mutual support, resource sharing, and building new connections.*



## trust building

The research revealed the complexity of sustaining trust within communities: practitioners must establish relationships of long-term trust and accountability, rather than act as an external force.

Ulysses “Butch” Slaughter reflected on trust and leadership in the city and within the Chester Made project: “People will sit and listen, but people are not quick to give. ... people have been scrapping for resources around here. ...And if you can get funding, nobody wants to collaborate to make it more powerful. People are competing with one another for scarce resources. The beauty of the work that we’re doing shows that there really is no such thing as scarce resources. Ideas are what make this thing move.

Several of the organizations noted that they continued to do the work—even if unfunded—to prevent enthusiasm from drying up. They want to be known as trusted members of the community capable of sustaining relationships with both residents and peer organizations; they want to be seen as more than the sum of their grant-funded projects. Sustained trust-building exists independent of funding cycles; as such, it often places additional strain on organizational capacity.

This sort of long-standing commitment is particularly necessary for healing-centered, justice work; systemic changes will not happen overnight. More than one organization spoke to the transient nature of politicians and other government officials, including planning and land use departments: these partners come and go, and have shifting priorities. Organizations and artists who emerge from within the communities are committed for the long term, sometimes bridging generations, and can serve as beacons of trust and hope. They can also adapt to take action on the chief concerns of the community at that point in time. This was mentioned as critical in the Chester Made and Mississippi Center for Cultural Production projects, among others.

*Chester-based poet, India Famous on Jupiter, led a poetry workshop as part of the Chester Made Broken Pieces series in 2018.*

# code switching and cultural sensitivity

Directly related to funding, code-switching emerged as a constant necessity across organizations and suggests long-term challenges to the equitable distribution of power, influence, and sustainable funding streams.

Organization heads use different behaviors and languages when communicating with grantmakers and donors than with the communities they serve, a necessity born out of the elitist, heavily academic frameworks that philanthropic organizations have in place. Securing grants often relies on the proper usage of terminology and industry buzz words that funders want to hear; not all community members possess this skill, nor should they be expected to. Thus, the responsibility to secure grants tends to fall most heavily on the organization heads who have been taught to straddle both worlds. This reinforces the difficulty in referring to the work as the humanities. Representatives may use different vocabulary to communicate with residents and other people on the ground, and only employ the term “humanities” when speaking with funders to secure grants. Leah Salgado (IllumiNative) referred to this practice as “assimilation through financial coercion,” an acknowledgment of how philanthropy often fails to meet or even understand the needs of those they fund. Qcc acknowledged the advantage that comes with having multiple, expert grant writers on staff.

As such, part of Qcc’s mission is to assist others (both artists and smaller organizations) with the grant writing process. Pamela Peniston expressed joy in being able to provide these services, but also reflected on the profound sadness and in-equitability of current funding realities which necessitate organizations having access to professional grant writers to secure meaningful support.

*Organization heads use different behaviors and languages when communicating with grantmakers and donors than with the communities they serve, a necessity born out of the elitist, heavily academic frameworks that philanthropic organizations have in place.*

The existence of organizational code-switching illuminates how present power mismatches require community organizations to walk a fine line between two worlds. Daniel Egusquiza (Barrio Alegría) described an episode in which several members of his organization attended a meeting at a university where many people of influence were also in attendance, the topic of conversation became so offensive to Egusquiza and his colleagues that he criticized the speaker and encouraged his team to walk out. While Egusquiza may have felt comfortable voicing his concerns in that audience, other community members did not. They were too intimidated to speak out. Communication and negotiation skills are essential assets in order to have a parallel seat at the table when speaking with funders, developers, or policy makers. But in addition to training and capacity building for members of community organizations, those in positions of power and privilege must be educated to have greater empathy and sensitivity for the diverse grassroots organizations they aim to serve. The onus to find understanding cannot fall on the shoulders of community organizations alone.

# sharing, media, and amplification

Sharing the stories generated through applied humanities work is essential, yet marketing and communication needs remain overlooked aspects of funding.

All organizations acknowledge the importance of using social media, websites, and newsletters for providing project updates, posting opportunities for involvement, and serving as a clearinghouse for project activity; however, in most cases there is still a slant towards analog formats of engagement rather than digital proxies—a flyer in the library or a personal presence at church gatherings. This personal approach seems to be the preferred method of outreach, both because it puts organizers out into the community, interacting with the residents they serve, and simply because it's the easiest thing they know how to do. While the importance of this on-the-ground work cannot be overstated, there is a real need to support applied humanities-oriented organizations with the skills and capacity to effectively disseminate their stories. PA Humanities also spoke of the struggle to establish a set of best practices around amplification. As both a grantor and grantee PA Humanities is in the position of needing to demonstrate its organization's impacts and successes without appropriating the work of others.

Aaron Foley noted that the biggest challenge in the Chief Storyteller's office faces was audience development in a changing technological landscape: "There is a lot of uncertainty about spending government money on [marketing, but we] have to adapt to new technologies and communication needs, there's just not really a roadmap for how to do that yet." Reflecting on her past work and communications at the Cumberland County Historical Society with Greater Carlisle Heart & Soul, Lindsay Varner echoed Foley's comments about capacity: "So much of my time ended up being spent on getting the word out and making sure we were reaching enough of the community. If I had assistance in that area, I could have focused a lot more of my time on heritage and preservation issues for the county." Moreover, Varner pointed out that the skills required for her humanities work were different from those necessary for communications and media. Throughout this work, it is difficult, and at times counter-productive, to rely on the same person for both areas of expertise, and yet resource-strapped organizations must constantly ask this of their staffers. This ultimately is a capacity issue, which relates to the funding and prioritization of resources across entities—government included. As the humanities are re-evaluated for new audiences, it is imperative to recognize the time and skills needed to support effective community engagement and equitable access to information.

Though the abrupt transition to remote work brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has been a steep learning curve for many organizations, being forced to embrace new technologies has come with some positives. By moving its Queer Arts Festival programming to a digital platform for the 2021 season, Qcc was able to reach a greatly expanded audience and provide closed captioning for deaf and hard of hearing communities. Expanding access to and availability of technologies is a pivotal tool for the sharing and amplification of humanities focused work.



*By moving its Queer Arts Festival programming to a digital platform for the 2021 season, Qcc was able to reach a greatly expanded audience and provide closed captioning for deaf and hard of hearing communities.*



Photo: Vashon Jordan Jr.

## learning from the pandemic and social justice movements

In March of 2020, when the pandemic necessitated an abrupt switch to virtual communication and strict social distancing protocols, various organizations reported an initial stage of denial and postponement that eventually transitioned into cancellations and a period of intensive planning to sustain as many programs and events virtually as possible.

Overall, organizations reported a shift in funding, away from large, project-based grants to smaller relief and need-based grants, with no drastic change in the availability of funds.

The countrywide racial justice movement that arose during the summer of 2020 yielded an uptick in grants supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives (in addition to the need-based, pandemic related grants mentioned above). Many of the organizations profiled in this report are already deeply rooted in programs that further racial justice and equity. For these organizations, the heightened awareness around these critical issues mainly served to reinforce such practices and provide additional funding sources for work already being undertaken but did not result in significant organizational changes. Understanding how these funds were used, how long they were offered, and how to value their larger impacts over the ensuing years will be critical for the changing landscape of the humanities.

Despite their best virtual efforts, many have still felt a relatable lack of connection to their communities (who are the heart of their work) and are optimistically planning to fully reinvigorate in-person events as advisable in 2022 and beyond. While these past years have shown it is possible to organize, facilitate, and stay connected remotely; personal and physical connections between community members in shared spaces is vital to the work being done in the humanities space. Furthermore, organizations remain concerned that emergency relief funding, that made much recent programming possible, will disappear or that future economic fluctuations will affect the availability of future grant and funding cycles.

PA Humanities recognized this was a critical time to use the humanities to take action to redress wrongs and speak new truths. Through ongoing projects like Chester Made and PA Heart & Soul, PA Humanities continued to reimagine how it could approach advocacy and visibility for the humanities and be a model for place-based funders, municipal planners, cultural organizations, civic engagement researchers, and community organizers. Through its mix of participatory research and longer-term special projects and collaborative co-funding, PA Humanities acted as a responsive community partner and thought leader for social change and racial justice whose staff worked alongside residents, local government, elected officials, cultural organizations, and state agencies.

Through the resident-led Chester Made project, community leaders looked to storytelling and tools of the humanities for community building and resilience as being essential during the pandemic. Residents began creating online community spaces to produce and share digital stories of “What Makes Chester Home.” “These are artifacts that can be shared,” says project advisor and urban sociologist Christopher Mele, who has written on Chester in *Race and the Politics of Deception: The Making of an American City*, on the project website launched as the pandemic shut down face-to-face programming. “Collectively as a community archive, they are telling the stories of Chester that have been pushed aside. I’ve said this is kind of a counter-narrative to the official history. It’s going to be a powerful project.”

For residents like local journalist Stefan Roots, who is working alongside others to create a community archive of the stories, it provides a platform to speak his truth about why he stays in Chester. When someone asks why he wants to live in a place with crime, poverty, and pollution: “The real reason I live in Chester is: ‘I don’t want to be your neighbor!’” It’s his own community, his family, and the revitalization that’s happening that keep him rooted in his hometown. He would live nowhere else.



Photo: Jason Malmont, The Sentinel

*To raise awareness about historic Lincoln Cemetery, the Cumberland County Historical Society worked with the Carlisle community, descendants of individuals buried in the cemetery, and local artists to recognize the over 600 African American residents buried there dating back to the 1900s.*

# V. Conclusion: A Call to Action and New Research

As the charge for this research was to define new directions for collaboration with the community development sector and new ways to structure humanities and place-based funding, this section lays out several options—many underscored by community needs and responses during the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movements—to be refined as new research progresses and future discussions take place.

**Celebrate storytelling:** Storyfinding, telling, and sharing is essential; it is the foundation on which the humanities have been built. While this practice has been acknowledged and established as a core tactic among a wide range of professionals, its full potential remains undervalued by funders and philanthropic organizations. A future opportunity lies in using storytelling more robustly for project evaluation, as some partners mentioned, and in allowing community members or project participants to themselves evaluate successes and outcomes. These applications of storytelling can then shape next steps, or how a project or program could be realigned. External storytelling (media) can also be shifted to tell more daring, even controversial stories of organizational change, and radical approaches to shifting power in grantmaking. Storytelling is more than a method of recording; it provides validation, empowers marginalized communities, sparks dialog, propels projects, and nurtures empathy. Capturing and disseminating diverse stories should be seen as an acceptable project outcome.

**Invest in commitment:** PA Humanities has already demonstrated its commitment to putting resources behind embedded community organizations through Chester Made and the Greater Carlisle Heart & Soul, among other initiatives. This has enabled the consistent and incremental work essential to achieving project goals, recognizing and supporting new leaders, building trust, and maintaining momentum. There is an immense need for financial support for the good work that is already taking place, providing a boost for existing successes rather than shifting to the next revamped funding strategy, or only funding desperate cases that reinforce damaging savior narratives. If one believes in equity, democracy, and justice, then one believes in the power of this work, and in the power of the humanities. The next step is to acknowledge that enacting social change takes time. There will be setbacks, there will be resistance, but success materializes in learning exchanges and persistence.

**Invest in new leaders:** While many organizations cited the need for education and skill building, few programs explicitly do this work. The prevalence of organizational code-switching highlights the need to not only invest in skill building, but also to physically shift the makeup of who holds power, and actively rethink who should be eligible to receive grants within this work. This is true leadership development. The model demonstrated by Nexus Community

Partners is exceptional because it was able to see a need and leverage resources to begin shifting the balance of power by putting new voices at the decision-making table. The need for funding skill development, including digital literacy, was reinforced by many of those interviewed. Knowledge is power.

**Talk about transformation:** There is a much-needed shift in how grantmaking is done and shared. This is intertwined with the RFP process, the rules of engagement, the explicit language required to participate in the conversation, and the reciprocal education of those in power to have greater empathy and understanding for the communities they expressly serve. Most of all, funders need to take a leap of faith in providing resources to “nontraditional actors.” This puts resources closer to the ground, directly in the communities for which they are intended, not through a “middleman,” and affirms that a community knows its own needs better than anyone else.

**Build power through exchange:** Much of this work deals with shifting definitions of identity and creating narrative change. As such, there is an inclination to search for commonalities as a means to unite seemingly disparate communities; this must be done delicately so as to not erase or diminish important differences and points of pride. There exists a powerful opportunity in using the humanities to quell the extreme divisiveness that presently exists within the country. How can personalized experiences and traumas be elevated to create empathy and understanding, rather than reduced to find commonality? How can we work collectively to change the narrative in order to build real, equitable power?

**Acknowledge sustained traumas and prioritize healing:** Several organizations are doing valuable work using asset driven strategies to build skills, cultivate agency, and work through barriers to justice—both in the past and present day. A concern that constantly comes up in community engagement, especially when conducted by an external group, is the need to be honest about past injustices and future possibilities. Marginalized and disinvesting communities are themselves not lacking, but their access to power, resources, and visible platforms have been. Conversations acknowledging past and ongoing injustices can be difficult to navigate for both community members and organizers, but the outcomes of these conversations can be powerfully catalytic particularly for racial and social justice movements. More examples and a strong articulation of how healing-centric and other asset-based approaches have led to shifting centers of power is needed to make this work more urgent for funders and peer organizations.

Since starting this paper, new literature has been published that should be acknowledged as pivotal to developing the humanities’ place in civic engagement, placemaking, and community development and in many ways can serve as a jumping off point for a new field of research centered around the applied humanities. Metris Art Consulting, PolicyLink, and the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine published their study on the impact of the arts and culture on community well-being through the lens of social cohesion, *WE-Making: How Arts & Culture Unite People to Work Toward Community Well-Being* (2021).<sup>18</sup> The goals of this and other articles from PolicyLink are to recommend strategies for funders and policymakers, such as investing in community organizing efforts in arts, health, and community development;



“Humanities is a very academic way of classifying things. It is an outward facing descriptor for grants and policy. “Narrative change” is the word we use to describe our work. It’s an emergent subject. It encompasses social justice and racial justice. People understand what we mean when we say that.”

— Leah Salgado, Chief Impact Officer, IllumiNative



Photo: JR the Legend

using a culture-in-all-policies approach; and looking at international examples of truth and reconciliation commissions. The work redefines the concept of “social cohesion” through psychology and sociology: “Social cohesion is what we call it when individuals feel and act as part of a group that is oriented toward working together.” While this new definition further supports the themes of identity, creating cross-cultural empathy, and trust building, practitioners and participants should be careful not to allow social cohesion to turn into “othering” because of the focus on commonalities and place attachment/belonging.

Other notable publications include the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco Community Development’s latest review series issue “Transforming Community Development through Arts and Culture,” and the new 2020 *The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking*.<sup>19</sup> Particularly relevant chapters to the work of this paper are: “Introduction” by Cara Courage, “A Future of Creative Placemaking” by Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita, “Public Transformation: Affect and Mobility in Rural America” by Lindsey Ogle, and “Creative Placemaking and Placekeeping Evaluation Challenges from the Practitioner Perspective: An Interview with Roy Chan” by Maria Rosario Jackson.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the following articles published in 2021 center on the importance of identity, transformation, and a healing-centered approach: *The Scholar as Human: Research and Teaching for Public Impact* by Anna Sims Bartel, et al.; “A Sense of Belonging” by Reimagining the Civic Commons; and “A Healing-Centered, Culturally Rooted Approach to Trauma” by Lauren Padilla.<sup>21</sup>

PA Humanities and PennPraxis were grateful for the opportunity to connect with organizations across the US doing transformational work to advance social justice and community connection through the humanities. This recent research suggests that this is a field and a focus that will yield further lessons that can be applied to a wide variety of challenges and has become increasingly relevant as practitioners and community members seek to make meaning, build power, and engender belonging amid frequently shifting landscapes. We look forward to future collaborations and seeing what important work emerges in the years to come.



“Representation matters. The more we populate our media with our stories we can change the negative narratives that come from outside the city. People in Reading start to believe them. Storytelling has become a way of survival, or pushing back, or standing up.”

— Daniel Egusquiza, Founder and Executive Director, Barrio Alegría

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## acknowledgements / credits / citations

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