



WEAVING FORWARD

"OUR ANCESTORS LAID THE FOUNDATION FOR THIS WORK
AND THIS MOMENT." -HALIMA AFI CASSELLS

CONSTELLATIONS
CULTURE CHANGE FUND
CULTURAL BEARER RECOMMENDATIONS

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PREPARED BY ARTCHANGEUS

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INTRODUCTION AND CASE MAKING

We are living in an era of momentous change; our very existence is being reshaped in ways that challenge even the most progressive arts organizations to question deeply into our practices and values to strategically enact a more just and sustainable world. This report is the result of Constellations partnership with ArtChangeUS to respectfully inquire into the work of Culture Bearers; artists and cultural practitioners who represent a significant sector of the arts and culture field; but one that exists at the margins of arts validation, discussions and funding. This is an exploration into how Constellations might radically imagine its programs and resources to engage with Culture Bearers; it is also an important step towards building relationships that will weave the work of Constellations far into the future.

In the arts sector, the term “Culture Bearer”, advanced through the leadership of organizations like the First Peoples Fund, has become widely adopted without being fully understood, engaged, or supported. Like Native Land Acknowledgment, it is an evolution that represents movement forward, but its naming without engagement only perpetuates further disenfranchisement. Heritage-based arts funding has historically been the least funded “discipline” and funding for Native Americans remains only .4%

Acting to radically reverse egregious practices of exclusion can be startlingly simple. After a self study revealed inequity in its grant making, the Northwest Area Foundation committed to investing 40 percent of their annual grant dollars to support Native-led organizations, from 2012-2020 they invested 45.6% - \$63.4 million of \$139 million of grants awarded. Constellations, a bold field-driven BIPOC-led artist initiative, has the opportunity to move beyond inclusion or equity, to a strategic centering of Culture Bearers. An investment in Culture Bearers embodies radical change including:

- **Narrative Shift:** Culture Bearers are the change. They represent an embedded presence in place, community trust and mutual support, intergenerational connection, and are wellsprings for community health and individual healing. They are embodied organizing hubs for critical issues including environmental regeneration, immigration, Indigenous sovereignty, food security, restorative justice, domestic violence and rebuilding of family, placekeeping, language restoration and cultural identity.
- **Scale:** Every Culture Bearer stands within a community and legacy. Some are part of massive practices of scale (e.g. the Northwest Canoe Journey, regional Basketweavers alliances), sacred practices with public interface (e.g. Mardi Gras Indians, hālau hula, altar building), BIPOC-centered economic drivers (e.g. West Indian Day and other ethnic

parades, land stewardship). Whether a practitioner is part of an extensive network or one who works within the urgency of endangered practice, the Culture Bearer represents an enormous scale of generations rippling beyond their lifetime.

- **Placekeeping:** Culture Bearers have led the fight against displacement due to gentrification, economic inequality, climate change, and disenfranchisement to regain land or define the aesthetics of the built environment (e.g. weaver Bud Lane of the Siletz, New Orleans Master Craftsman Guild). Their presence is at the heart of what defines every beloved place and community.
- **Sustainability:** Culture Bearers have innovated and sustained arts and cultures in a universe parallel to the narrowly defined arts sector. They have grown their art forms and bases of community support through values and practices grounded in mutuality, generosity, and shared resources. Culture Bearers have survived attempted extermination, slavery, legal disenfranchisement, and media distortion to grow practices that transcend time.

WHO ARE CULTURE BEARERS?

*It's not only about individuals claiming to be from a Nation or Community,
but which community claims them.*

—Emmy Her Many Horses, Lakota creator and educator

Throughout our research, we were keen to hear what people call themselves. Some embrace “Culture Bearer”, along with other names, to self-describe. Others are resistant to the term as “bearing” implies a burden, not an honor. US art institutions have largely focused on a type of pedagogy grounded, less in thorough knowledge, but in the *expression of power* to control knowledge. Segmenting “fine artists” from “folk artists” aims to qualitatively distinguish the former from people who have developed their creative practice through culturally-specific, community-centered transmission. “Folk”—a word used to describe all people, is often extended to mean “traditional” or, if inherited, “heritage-based” artist. Resisting the hierarchies of terminology, we assert that culture bearing is popular culture as it relies on direct participation in cultural stewardship by the people of a community.

To this end, we describe Culture Bearers as artists and carriers of ancestral knowledge who weave past, present, and future stewardship of land, culture, community, and spirit.

CULTURE BEARERS ARE:

knowledge keepers • tradition keepers • elders • tradition teachers • native intelligence developers • artists • family members • relations • caretakers • frontline warriors fighting for the four elements • gardeners of this planet • singers of our songs • original gardeners • wisdom bearers

Culture Bearers counter and evolve modernity's reflex of commodification; they bring forward futures that uplift life-centered power. They lead direct alternatives to our present condition with an imbued, tested power of resilience because "the transactions are about energies and relationships, not products" as described by Kalehua Krug, Kākau practitioner and Ka Waihona charter school Principal. Culture Bearers are not artists who connect to culture bearing as a topic or theme. They hold the stories and embodied practices of our Indigenous, Diasporic and immigrant communities.

Culture Bearers:

- **Recognize and innovate in alignment with ancestral knowledge, values, and practices.** Culture Bearing represents a living filament between generations. They are not static. *"Traditional artists are the most forward thinking people on the planet because they're thinking about the next generations. And in order to stay relevant to their communities, they're continuously innovating."* –Amy Kitchener, Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA) Executive Director
- **Operate intergenerationally to prioritize knowledge transmission.** Through the dynamic transference of call and praxis, Culture Bearers guide understanding of the changing world. *"Children need to know their own history to fortify their own spirit and also to nurture creativity,"* says Ofelia Esparza, TONALLI Studio founder and 6th generation Chicana altarista. She adds, Culture Bearing as a *"creative process is beyond drawing and painting - it's solving problems with the arts and also to look at how people have survived terrible times, especially families."*
- **Combat threats of erasure through inherited cultural expressions and ways of knowing.** First Peoples Fund President Lori Pourier reminds us, *"There are so many cultural systems and protocols in place for us that reminded us how to be good human beings and relatives."* Practices that have survived physical and cultural violence, navigate time to confront truncated histories aimed at silencing our global majority truths. Pourier adds, *"For the last 120 years, so much of that was lost. We have 120 years of rebuilding and reclaiming tradition based systems."*

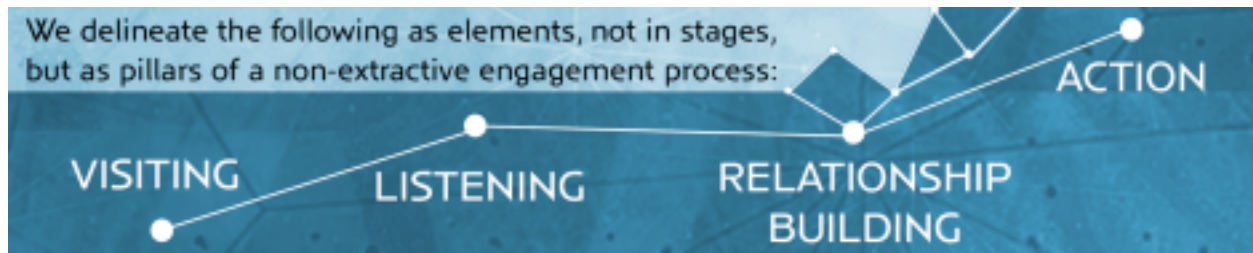
- **Show agency aligned with accountability to cultural origins and community-recognized excellence.** *“The master can only be a master to the extent that the community recognizes their mastery,”* offers Dr. Maribel Álvarez, founder of the Southwest Folklife Alliance. One cannot be without the whole. This form of accountability guides both innovation of practice and community-based transmission.

METHODOLOGY

“The land is our family and the waterways are our bloodline.”

–Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation

This report is anchored in the ArtChangeUS practice of Visiting, Listening, Relationship Building, and Action, interrelated pillars in a process of equity. There are many throughlines across the vastness of the Culture Bearer communities, yet it is their collective association with mutual trust and genuine relationship building that inform our process for engagement.



We began by researching a list of Culture Bearers to create a matrix of geography, métier, race, ethnicity and gender, composed of Indigenous, immigrant and historic BIPOC practitioners and organizers. In designing a 3-hour Zoom session, we prioritized the prospective beneficiaries of a Culture Bearer grant program: the artists themselves. Weighting the participant list towards practitioners, we moved most of the cultural organizers, strategists and grantmakers to seven 1:1 conversations focused on best practice.

The Zoom Convening of 16 Culture Bearers was opened by ArtChangeUS team member, Kapena Alapai (Kanaka Maoli), who chanted *Ua Ao Hawai'i*, a mele inspiring the dawning of enlightenment. Its haku mele, Kalena Da Silva and Larry Kimura, remind us that, “Our traditional knowledge [is] slipping away, generation after generation. But...with the rising of each new day, that knowledge from our ancestors and knowledge of today can be ours if we want it, to make tomorrow even better.” This observation of protocol from the organizers grounded the session and broke from the arts meeting performative convention of calling in an Indigenous person to

give a blessing. It set the stage for a conversation among peers and accomplice change makers.

Each participant introduced themselves, their practice, and acknowledged teachers, leaders, or their lineage of practice, taking the time that is a crucial part of **Visiting**. Multiple breakout sessions deepened opportunities for **Listening** as participants met and learned from each other, prompted by a series of questions: “Generations from now, what would a thriving future look like within your own cultural practice?”; “What have you forged, experienced, or seen work that has best supported your culture bearing practice?”; and “Constellations has committed to Culture Bearers in their work. What would you recommend they do to best be helpful?”

The convening wove participants with whom ArtChangeUS or Constellations has prior relationships; as well, it brought new relations into the circle, suggested by NDN Collective, First Peoples Fund, Sipp Culture and others. Centering **Relationship Building** engendered trust by engaging with full transparency as to the meeting’s purpose and Constellations intentions in the Culture Bearer space.

What was learned from each participant informed **Action**, adapting what we heard into actionable next steps, i.e, a set of recommendations.

This is an ongoing process that does not end when formal engagement does.

WHAT WE HEARD

Through the aforementioned Listening and Visiting sessions, ArtChangeUS distilled the following key distinctions of Culture Bearer needs.

VALUES

- **Culture Bearers value place - cultivating, protecting, reappropriating, attaining, living, and creating on the land that is tied to their ancestors in order for their community to thrive and for future sustainability.** *It is vital to understand where you are - why your neighborhood is so full of art, where it comes from, and its meaning. This lets us answer: how do I settle into the layers of culture that came before me, that are here now, that are coming forward?* –Rosanna Esparza Ahrens, 7th generation Xhicana altarista and artist
- **Culture Bearers emphasize that language revitalization is critical.** *Haitian Kreyòl is a revolutionary language... as you're learning it you're reconnecting with ancestral*

knowledge. –Wynnie Lamour, linguist and Haitian Creole Language Institute founder; It's difficult to label everything we do but if I do compartmentalize: composer, singer of our songs, language speaker, native intelligence developer. –Kalehua Krug, Kākau practitioner and Ka Waihona Principal

- **Culture Bearers demand the next generation be in the room with them** *You can't look at seven generations in the future unless you know yourself to be the connector between the three generations before and looking at the three generations after. –Great Grandmother Mary Lyons, Ojibwe Elder*
- **Culture Bearers want to see their elders celebrated.** *To become healthy again is to begin to recognize who we are, to live a healthy life and have teaching from the elders about how to live as human beings in a beautiful way. –Keya Kessler, Grandmother of the Little Big Medicine Sundance*

COMPENSATION

- **Culture Bearers want salaries to sustain livelihoods** *If a Culture Bearer has to work in Walmart and can't afford to work in community, that's a problem. –Theresa Secord, Penobscot basket maker; I would want you just to have a salary to do your work in the community because that's how valuable you are. –Dakota Camacho, Matao/Chamoru multi-disciplinary creator*
- **Culture Bearers want long-term support** *Long term connection to a community is definitely one of the key questions to be asking, is there a long term relationship with the community? –Steve Zeitlin, City Lore Director*
- **Culture Bearers crave more support for their big dreams** *There has been a false ceiling put on Culture Bearers who have not had the opportunity to dream, or imagine their work at scale because they have largely been excluded from arts philanthropy. There's also this conundrum: if you're a small organization, you can't have big expensive ideas. –Amy Kitchener, ACTA Executive Director*
- **Culture Bearers want to honor those who support them** *Cultural Bearers, they're like centers of gravity... an investment in them, not one fellowship, not one grant, but like, an investment in that person, is creating jobs for the people around them, is creating visibility and platform for the people around them. –Prumsodun Ok, NATYARASA Dance Company Founder*

LIFE SUPPORTS

- **Culture Bearers need healthcare**

We as arts organizations should not be tasked with figuring out healthcare. –Jia Lok Pratt, Sweet Water Foundation COO; Especially healthcare that leads to wellness... That's how our ancestors operated. [These are] basic things that no human being should struggle for. –Quetzal Flores, Chicano artista and musician

- **Culture Bearers need rest**

We all know this work is generational and personal, humanity is calling upon us to provide indigenous solutions to how we care for one another, our home, and our earth. It's hard work. Is there a resource available to provide respite and rest for Culture Bearers? –Mahina Paishon-Duarte, Waiwai Collective Co-founder and Executive Officer

LEARNING/SHARING

- **Culture Bearers want to learn from each other**

When humans get a chance to meet other humans, there is trust and recognition, and then I don't have to put myself into boxed categories. –Jia Lok Pratt, Sweet Water Foundation COO; We need to revive these traditions to preserve trades which are so unique to historic places like NOLA, Charleston, and Savannah. We need to create access to these trades for our communities. –Jonh Hankins, New Orleans Master Crafts Guild Co-founder & CEO

TRUST

- **Culture Bearers want to be trusted; they know how to spend their money**

Unrestricted grants are essential—especially as we are going to start working on decolonization and land back. –Christina Maria Patiño Xochitlzihuatl Houle, Las Imaginistas Co-founder and Chief Architect; I'm having to be a multi-armed deity that is grabbing, entrusting, reaching. It's not just about dance, we're creating jobs, we're letting people who never would be seen and heard have a voice. –Prumsodun Ok, NATYARASA Dance Company Founder

RECOMMENDATIONS

This work ...is the essence of democracy, this idea that the people most impacted are the ones who have the power to make the decisions about the systems that impact their lives. –Carlton Turner, Sipp Culture Director and Lead Artist

ArtChangeUS recommends that Constellations core strategies and investments serve culture bearers across programs and structures and design specifically for culture bearers. Constellations faces an opportunity to boldly advance field leadership by shifting the paradigm for how Culture Bearers are validated, learned from, collaborated with, and supported. Inclusion, often a marginalizing framework, is the approach of most grant programs that incorporate individual Culture Bearers into existing programs. A handful of extraordinary philanthropies have committed to investing in an equity approach, reversing the percentages of dollars to Native-led organizations. Exemplary non-profits, like NALAC, focus on a specific ethnic, racial or Indigenous populations in their efforts to re-vision the arts field. Constellations is uniquely engaging Culture Bearers across geography, artistic disciplines, and cultures; creating a powerful intersection of Indigenous, immigrant and historic BIPOC creatives and their communities. Centering Culture Bearers alongside Artist Disruptors in Constellations design and implementation is an important step in how Culture Bearers are recognized as embodying cultural strategy steeped in the healing of the environment and ourselves, redressing historical wrongs, and impacting future generations.

Based on the inquiries of our convening, the 1:1 expert interviews, and ArtChangeUS's organizing experience with Culture Bearers, we recommend a multi-point program with the following features:

Culture Bearer Fellows - Fellowships would answer the urgent needs of Culture Bearers for financial stability and wellness in order to center artistic and community practices, ensure that 50% or more of Constellations fellows are culture bearers who receive an annual salary and full healthcare.

Language Grants - This fund recognizes the importance of language as a carrier of culture and a pillar of vibrant communities. Aimed to support revitalization, archival, and transmission efforts, this fund would support Culture Bearers working in language and cultural practice as it applies to education, climate justice, language justice, accessibility, and/or knowledge transmission projects.

Partnership Grants, Convening, and Residencies

Partnership grants would leverage resources, build regional relationships and impact, extend network building, and increase the number of artists benefiting from a Culture Bearer program. Through collaborative partnerships with organizations already working in the Culture Bearer field, Constellations would respectfully enter by giving added value and learning from organizations that have created innovative programs, cultivated larger networks, and most importantly, will be continuing to work with Culture Bearers in the future.

Other partnership grants could also be to collaborate with artist residency centers to give much needed retreat, wellness, and creative time for curated cohorts of Culture Bearers. There would be no programmatic agenda; proximity to peers in a restorative creative environment would benefit the wellness of individuals and build relationships across geography and cultures.

With guidance from the Culture Bearer Design Team's conceptual leadership, Constellations would convene grantee cohorts of Culture Bearers and Artist Disruptors to learn from one another and restore their energies. With stewarded goodwill and creativity-led programming, the cohort, thought leaders, artists, organizers, funders, and other stakeholders would share the opportunity to visit in place. Culture Bearers and their ways of knowing will be our nexus for wide reaching, issue-focused conversations with Culture Bearers as the wellsprings of their communities.

Wayfinding Fund - This fund could provide additional support to Culture Bearer Fellows for the purpose of travel, knowledge exchange or other "Blue Sky" opportunities (sabbatical, loan repayment, oral history or memoir writing, etc.). In the spirit of Culture Bearer generosity, the Culture Bearer Fellows and Design Lab participants would also nominate awardees. An additional fund would be made available for open call small grants that support "Wayfinding" opportunities.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transmission Fund - The Constellations Culture Bearer Design Lab participants would nominate artists to receive support dedicated to Culture Bearers sharing methodology with the next generation addressing the expressed need for intergenerational learning and building off known success of practices such as the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance mentoring program and the Southwest Folklife Alliance's Master-Apprentice Artist Award Program. Focused grants will prioritize direct connection and relationship between Culture Bearers, learners, and their community.

Implementation

The substance of the Listening and Visiting sessions were extrapolated to create the aforementioned concert of design options for Constellations. The successful implementation and maximum impact of the Culture Bearer program is related to how it is embedded within the

evolving Constellations structure. We recommend a team approach. If carried in-house, the Culture Bearer programs should be the responsibility of several staff members who bring the cultural fluency and experience of working with culture bearers, across the programmatic/administrative structure, including the advisory board. Assigning the program to one staff manager or a manager with multiple-program responsibilities risks both diminishing the potential of the program and possible staff overwhelm.



Understand these investments are Nation Building work.

–Dakota Camacho, Matao/Chamoru multi-disciplinary creator

Grantmakers working with Culture Bearers and their global majority communities should build individual and team capacity to address the power dynamics of this particular funder/grantee relationship. As a vast community with endless nuances, it cannot be assumed that any one person can hold all of the knowledge necessary to cross into each community using generalized assumptions. It takes teamwork to hold the breadth of work, and yet the connections made to each community are personal and cannot be handed off to unknowing team members.

For Constellations grantmaking, it is foundational to understand the differences between Traditional, Tradition-based, Tradition-influenced, and Tradition-claiming artists, expanding on Lily Kharrazi's framing. In this interpretive framework, a Culture Bearer program would focus on artists from the Traditional and Tradition-Based categories:

- Traditional – coming from and informing cultural communities of practice, representing generations of stewardship, and knowledge transmission.
- Tradition-Based – based in the same cultural communities of practice, but engaging as subject matter through a mix of heritage and new methodologies.
- Tradition-Influenced – an interpretation of a traditional or culturally based practice to express culture or commentary.
- Tradition-Claiming – asserting a relationship to a community that is not mutually recognized by that community.

Cultural competency, as a baseline understanding of a given community is important to build as it goes beyond superficial recognition; however competency alone can foster biases. As we build competency, it must be accompanied by Humility. Humility serves as a reverence for what we are privileged to know and an acknowledgment that there is much we don't know beyond.

The following competencies are requisite for effective management programs supporting Culture Bearers:

ADMINISTRATIVE AND PROGRAMMATIC COMPETENCIES

*Give credit to the communities and individuals
called in to inform your understanding.*

–Angela Cox, Vice President of External Affairs, Rasmuson Foundation

- A knowledge of and existing working relationships with organizations and artists in the Culture Bearer sector;
- Experience designing and administering responsive and flexible grantmaking;
- Experience with collaborative programmatic design and implementation;
- A track record of successful collaboration with racially, ethnically, culturally and geographically diverse communities;
- A committed approach to equity practices, including accreditation and validation of Culture Bearers;
- A demonstrated practice of field-building between stakeholders including Culture Bearers, funders, and other coalitions; and
- A proven ability for empathetic, mutual-success oriented collaboration.

CULTURAL COMPETENCIES

*Your role as an intermediary is crucial to translating the work on the ground.
You are a silent warrior for these communities.*

–Jia Lok Pratt, Sweetwater Foundation

- Recognition of ritual and protocol is central to Culture Bearer communities.
- Design and facilitation of meetings and processes must center Culture Bearers values and practices.
- Understand grantmaking with Culture Bearer communities is relationship oriented; investing in consistent relationship building produces long lasting outcomes.
- Support decolonial perspectives as articulated by Indigenous peoples.
- Commitment to ongoing work to undo society-influenced internal biases (e.g. anti-Blackness, ableism)
- Working with Culture Bearers requires patience; any re-contextualizing work should be done in collaboration.
- Language competency beyond English is an asset to this work.

CONCLUSION

We must continue to tighten the weave.

–Lori Pourier, President, First Peoples Fund

Constellations is in a strategic position to demonstrate field leadership by encompassing the full breadth of who artists are, valuing the profound role that Culture Bearers embody, expanding our cultural networks, and dismantling partitions and hierarchies that aim to keep our communities divided. The Constellations programs serving Culture Bearers and Artist Disruptors are multi-faceted approaches to pursue Constellations-led narrative change. Innovative program design and relationships with long-trusted organizations supporting Culture Bearers allows Constellations to steward the bounty of Culture Bearers' approach to a vibrant future.

The expansive dreaming and visioning of Constellations is mirrored in the Culture Bearers, artists deeply rooted in the earth and our futures.