



Grantmakers in the Arts  
2003 Conference

## THE EDGE

### Proceedings from the Conference

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W Hotel  
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### THE EDGE BETWEEN CULTURES MARGINS: COMMUNITIES OF COLOR DURING TIMES OF RETRENCHMENT

*Off site: Town Hall*

Several large national foundations have recently announced the end of their arts and cultural funding at a national level. Although it is too early to see whether this is part of a larger trend, it merits discussion since it would effect hundreds of arts organizations. What are the implications – short and long-term – of the decisions of large national funders on the field? Whether borne out by quantitative evidence or not, the perception is that the foundation sector is a place where organizations of color are part of the conversation and can garner support. If national foundations abandon arts funding, will their decisions have a greater effect on organizations of color than on others and, by extension, a greater impact on cultural work of color internationally?

This session was followed by a discussion with award-winning choreographer Donald Byrd about how this topic directly affects his work as an individual artist. Byrd toiled for many years to create, finance, and produce *The Harlem Nutcracker*. He will show excerpts from the piece and tell of his odyssey in getting funding for and making this work.

*Session Designer  
and Moderator:* Olga Garay  
*Doris Duke Charitable Foundation*

*Panelists:* Dudley Cocke  
*Roadside Theater and Trustee, Bush Foundation*  
Marta Moreno Vega  
*Caribbean Cultural Center*  
Stephanie Ellis-Smith  
*Central District Forum for Arts & Ideas*  
Roy M. Huhndorf  
*Koahnic Broadcast Corporation*  
Donald Byrd  
*Spectrum Dance Theater*

*October 20, 2003, 3:00 p.m.*

**GARAY:** My name is Olga Garay, and I'm the program director for the arts of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, which is based in New York City. I'm also on the board of Grantmakers in the Arts, and I'm going to moderate this panel.

Before I ask panelists to give a brief history about themselves, I want to thank Town Hall for hosting this session and give you a synopsis of what will take place here today.

At 4:15 there is a scheduled break and Spider Kedelsky, who is the artistic director of Town Hall, will come and speak about where we are and then give US a tour of Town Hall, which is one of the most aesthetically pleasing performance spaces in this fair city. So that's about a fifteen minute break, and that will soon be followed by a presentation that Donald Byrd will make during the second hour and fifteen minute part of the session.

We want this to be as interactive as possible, but unless you're really burning, you shouldn't interrupt the speakers. Just jot down what your questions are, and we will leave significant time towards the end of this session for questions and answers.

So, without further ado, I'm going to turn to Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, who has been a dear friend and colleague for twenty years. I'm going to ask each of the panelists to introduce themselves, and I'll pitch in if I think they're not doing a laudatory enough job. *[Laughs]* So, Marta.

**VEGA:** Good afternoon. I'm the founder and now chair of the Caribbean Cultural Center, African Diaspora Institute of New York. It's an international organization that focuses on the African diaspora connecting the journey of our communities from West Africa, Central Africa into the Americas.

I'm also the incorporator of *Amigos del Museo del Barrio*, which is the organization that runs *El Museo del Barrio*. I'm part of the development of the Network of Centers of Color touring network. Also Dudley and I developed a global advocacy network that was functional during the nineties, looking at issues of communities of color and marginal communities and the funding of government and private funding.

**ELLIS-SMITH:** Thank you, Olga, for inviting me to be on this panel. My name is Stephanie Ellis-Smith, and I'm the founding executive director of the Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas. This organization is based here in Seattle, and I should say that the Central District is the historic home of African Americans in

this city. Our organization is an arts and cultural organization that looks at the profound impact of the African American experience to our common American experience. We are a multidisciplinary organization in that we present music, visual arts, lectures, and topics of interest to a diverse audience in Seattle.

This is my first opportunity with national funders and talking about issues related to grantmaking in the arts. My background is actually science, I've been trained as a biochemist, and this is my seventh or eighth year in the arts scene. So I'm also very happy to be here. Thank you.

**HUHNDORF:** My name is Roy Huhndorf; and I also thank you, Olga, for inviting me here today. I'm from Alaska, I was born in Alaska. I'm of Yupik Eskimo and German descent. My mother was the Yupik in the family, so I identify with my Yupik side.

My life's career has been one I think best characterized as in the field of human development. I have been involved for most of my professional life in trying to create opportunities for the Native Alaskan community in Alaska, most notably involved in the administration of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

This was an act passed by Congress in 1971 to settle the land claims of Alaska native people. It involved a grant of land and money, and Congress took a novel approach and created corporations and made tribal members shareholders in these corporations. There were twelve of them across the state, and I administered one of these for about twenty-one years as president and CEO. We used the settlement, which was one of land and money, and one in which we were free to invest and engage in the world of finance as we saw fit, as a tool for social advancement.

Since there was a reluctance on the part of Congress to recognize tribes in Alaska, we created nonprofit organizations, organized under the laws of the state. Some addressed job training and employment, others education, health, and housing. A couple of the others we created recently addressed cultural promotion and preservation. One of them is the Alaska Native Heritage Center, which is intended to bridge a better understanding among the races in Alaska about native cultures and history, a showcase of culture and language and history.

The other is Koahnic Broadcast, which is intended to create understanding among the races by getting the native agenda on the airwaves – the language, the culture, the history – and creating a better understanding among the races by having



the native voices mix with the larger society's voices on the airwaves across the country.

I am semi-retired today. I have a small consulting firm, and I am here as chairman emeritus of Jaclyn Sallee's Board. Jaclyn, by the way, is our president at Koahnic, and is here today to help me out in case I forget anything, which is likely.

**COCKE:** I'm Dudley Cocke, director of Roadside Theater, which is a part of Appalshop. Appalshop began as the Appalachian Film Workshop during the War on Poverty, 1969. The Federal Government in 1969 counted poor communities as minorities, so this OEO program was to give a head start to young filmmakers, high schoolers. It began in this one rural site, the Appalachian coal fields where I am, and then in eleven inner cities. They drew no distinction, then, between poor people, regardless of race, in their official guideline.

A lot of Appalshop's impetus came from the Civil Rights Movement which was happening to our south, and it came to US through Highlander Center in Newmarket, Tennessee, where a lot of the civil rights strategy was shaped, and previous to that, a lot of the labor strategy. So that was our sister organization.

The notion that we received from that Civil Rights work was that the stereotypes that are so persistent don't have to persist. It was about cultural empowerment, rewriting the history from within the culture, telling the story from the inside out. That's what we began doing in the central Appalachian coal fields.

Some people say, where are your politics today? Often I joke that I'm like that guy at the bus stop, still waiting for the Poor People's March on Washington on a May afternoon. As you remember, M. L. King, Jr. was assassinated in April, and that effectively ended the Poor People's March on Washington, which was scheduled in May.

That's the orientation of our organization. We make films and have a radio station and a record company. We publish and make original theater work. All of this work is about telling the Appalachian story from the inside out. The people working there are from that place.

We are particularly interested in connecting this Appalachian story to other stories, particularly to other stories of struggling communities around the U.S. and outside of the U.S. We just finished an exchange with Chinese filmmakers, in which we bypassed all the big cities and went straight to the countryside for that exchange.

When I leave here Thursday morning I'll be going south into the Central Valley to work with Hmong, Mistico, other new immigrant groups who want to tell their stories in public.

**GARAY:** Thank you. To refresh your memories, the topic of this discussion is based on the fact that, in the last couple of years as the economic crisis has hit, there has been a number of national foundations that have either completely wiped out their arts giving on a national level or refocused their giving to support only the communities where they are based. Because both communities of color and rural communities tend to not have the same types of foundations based in those sites, and the foundation community has been a very strong supporter of art making in such places, we felt that the retrenchment of national foundations from the national art making funding picture was having a much more adverse impact on communities of color and on rural communities.

That is the thesis that we are departing from, and obviously people can decide to agree or disagree with that thesis, and it's an open discussion. It isn't something that I think gets talked about very often.

Both Dudley and I are board members of Grantmakers in the Arts, and much of the emphasis of Grantmakers in the Arts is on grantmakers as the community. We wanted to broaden that discussion to say, yes, it's grantmakers, but we wouldn't be grantmakers if there weren't artists and arts organizations out there making the art. So to really try to look out beyond our professional needs and look at what our responsibility is as a leadership body.

We've asked the panelists to talk for about ten minutes each. So why don't we start with Marta?

**VEGA:** Thank you.

I think it's important to provide a broad stroke in terms of what the field that we are designating as communities of color, or organizations of color, or rural communities, and what the intent was when this field was created, and under what conditions it was created. If we look historically, and we look at the sixties movement, as Dudley was talking about, most of our institutions developed because we were looking at issues of civil rights, racial justice, social, economic, and educational justice. As the Civil Rights Movement impacted the Latino community, and native communities, and other communities in New York City, being Latina of African descent, it was very clear that we had a responsibility to join that movement.



My introduction to that movement was because there was also a parents' movement. The parents insisted on having a cultural institution that reflected the stories of Latinos, of Puerto Ricans. Looking at the Civil Rights Movement, they demanded of the Board of Education that a cultural project be developed that addressed the Puerto Rican community.

This is the genesis of *El Museo del Barrio*, a museum forty years later. It was a school project, founded by parents at the time – it was 1969 – looking for artists and educators that came from that community and could tell the story and teach the story to young people. So here you have an institution forty years later that is looking at mainstreaming itself, but its genesis is in parents. Parents as educators, parents as activists.

All of the work that I've done, based in New York and going nationally and internationally, has been grounded on the need for equity, has been grounded on the need to include the experiences of artists in cultural communities, that are part of the tapestry that is the United States. If we look at the sixties and the creation of most of our institutions, they are part of a movement. They are part of a quest for social justice, for racial justice, and for the inclusion of our experiences. Not within the box of aesthetics that we understood were part of the larger institutions, but within another shape, a shape that related to community. In fact, the leadership was basically artists, educators, parents, community activists.

As the development of these communities took on the role of building institutions, at least in the New York context, we began to look at the aesthetic criteria of funders. We started learning about funding. For the most part, we didn't fit.

When I went to the NEA and approached the head of the museums division, he said, "Puerto Ricans? What are Puerto Ricans?" [Laughter] And then he said, "A Puerto Rican museum? I don't think so."

It was obvious to US that there was no knowledge within the NEA then. We hadn't even thought of private foundations or approaching private foundations, but in public funding there was no awareness that we existed as a community. In fact, the insistence of artists, and the demonstration of artists in front of the Metropolitan Museum is what created "Ghetto Arts" in the New York State Arts Council.

That's very important, because the naming of what our institutions were from the funder end developed a context of marginalization. We had that Ghetto Arts label, and you couldn't

apply outside of Ghetto Arts. That was the only category available to communities of color at that time during the early sixties and into the seventies.

As we advocated for other labeling, Expansion Arts came into being in the NEA, and Ghetto Arts was changed to Special Programs to deal with communities of color. Here again was the marginal relationship.

What does that have to do with the topic? Clearly, if you're looking at institutions as ghetto arts, the funding is going to follow – ghetto funding. Little funding. Even though, in the broader world, arts in general gets less of the funding than any other category, being categorized as "special," "ethnic," or "expansion" arts, you were relegated to lesser funding.

In the eighties, as we became more astute and we began to study foundations and funding patterns, most of the US took on the outward advocacy as artists. That is, not only within our communities were we advocates for civil rights and social justice and had framed institutions to do that, we became advocates for this aesthetic on a broader basis.

We didn't see ourselves as art institutions. We didn't see ourselves as artists. We were members of a community. A community that has a history, that has contributed to world cultures and world aesthetics. We insisted upon a space that looked at the categories that we deemed important to our communities and the aesthetic criteria that we should be looking at.

National institutions came into being like TAC, NALAC, the global network that I referred to before that Dudley and I were part of with about eleven other leaders of communities, and all of us similar. It's very interesting because when I was thinking about this sort of historical context, I said, how did we come together? How did I meet Dudley? Because there weren't panels like this.

When funders started understanding that we had to be addressed, they had to find a solution to this sort of ghetto arts community. They began to put us on panels, and then we began to meet each other. Jerry Yoshitomi, Pedro Rodriguez. *Como se llama a Susana? Estebaca*. And all of us began to come together in panels addressing funders, but also organizing, taking the opportunity to meet each other.

This process led to a very important strategy, which was one of developing language, because we understood that funders liked language. [Laughter] We started developing terminology



like “stabilization.” We need a stabilization strategy. We started throwing out terms, “cultural equity” instead of “marginalization.”

It was very interesting. The terms got picked up, but the funding didn’t change.

So, what am I saying to address the topic? I’m saying that throughout the forty-year history of most of these organizations we’ve always been on the margins of funding.

Certain strategies have been developed to stabilize institutions, provide endowments; groups are handpicked to experiment with. But there’s never been a consistent strategy that addresses the aesthetic criteria that these institutions bring. Because the matrix that people generally understand are the mainstream models.

These institutions are social, activist institutions grounded in community, and often do not fit the model. Often cannot attract the board of directors or the level of money that will stabilize them over time. So that there has to be another strategy to address and stabilize these institutions.

The nineties, where everybody was talking about this boom, and at the same time that our institutions were getting firmer and more stabilized, people are not mentioning the politics of the times. Reaganomics, and the Reagan dialogue began to talk about not-for-profits as activist organizations that were detrimental to the country! And this is critical! Because not-for-profits that were advocating any issue were targets. That becomes problematic because the climate of activism that the sixties allowed was not available in the nineties.

Right now there’s not a national dialogue – maybe this is the first one – that begins to address what happens to these institutions that are institutions grounded in advocacy. They are institutions grounded on issues that must be addressed: racial justice, educational issues.

Dudley, he’s a director of theater, but his organization does it all! The Caribbean Cultural Center is a cultural institution, but we do it all. We work with young people in the schools. Artists go into the schools. We do documentaries.

We do whatever we feel is necessary to relate to the artists and community that we serve. Because that’s who we are, we’re part of that community and the community is part of us.

Now that there is a shifting in funding by private funders and public funding, we have lost at the

Caribbean Cultural Center, better than twenty-five percent of our funding. At the same time that everybody is saying how wonderful our work is, we have lost close to twenty-five percent of our funding. Our state line item went from \$250,000 to \$75,000. National Endowment for the Arts funding is almost not there. We could go on and on in terms of what this retrenchment means, in terms of institutions that have been considered marginal over forty years.

The important point that funders must look at and analyze is: How have these institutions survived over forty years in spite of starting out as under the label of ghetto arts?

I don’t care what terminology was given in any other state. It was basically the same. It was putting you in the margins.

We have existed for forty years in the margins. We have become quite influential. At the very bottom line the demographics and the shift in donation is going to insist upon looking at communities differently and funding differently. Because our institutions, if they don’t survive as institutions, the culture survives. There’s no question.

I was telling Dudley I’m doing a research project on global African-descended organizations throughout Latin America and Central America. There is more than \$73 billion being sent as remittances by our communities abroad. That is to Africa, that is to the Caribbean, Central America, Latin America, and probably Canada and other places. So that our communities do have a level of resource, and resources in this country and in this context means power.

The issue is, how does funding from funders, with the resources that are going back and forth, and the possibilities that are going back and forth, as we become a global community, get used to assure the survival of the voice of communities that are increasingly the numerical majority?

The reason we were created in the first place was to give voice to our issues. The issues have not disappeared. That’s key. Because we would assume that over forty years there would have been a significant dent if funding had been equitable, if we had been able to do the job that we were supposed to do.

We have more young people in prison. We have more people dropping out of school. We have increases in health issues. If we’re going to look at how we go forward, we need to look at the institutions that are there doing a job and seeing how we can maximize the job that they have to



do, given the communities and given the shift in demographics that the nation is going through.

This is something – and the research has to be done – that funders need to look at, because the demise of these institutions will mean the lack of voice for communities. Does it mean going back to the sixties and then having other movements that begin to emerge? How will they emerge in this present political climate?

Thank you.

**GARAY:** Thank you. I'm going to ask Roy to pick up the discussion next.

**HUHDORF:** Thank you. Again, my name is Roy Huhndorf and my experience has been totally in Alaska. As I'd mentioned earlier, I have been in the area of human development for many years. I mentioned the Native corporations in Alaska, but before I go back to that, just generally on Alaska...

Alaska is a relative newcomer in terms of the national foundation considerations. It's been viewed as very remote, even as a foreign country sometimes. There's not much known about potential funding opportunities there until recently.

About ten years ago the Rasmuson Foundation, which is in fact the only old money in Alaska, sponsored a yearly trip bringing executives from foundations up to Alaska to familiarize themselves with the state and some of the problems in the state. Now we're beginning to see more and more foundations willing to look at funding opportunities in the state and working with groups in the state because of those visitations.

As I'd mentioned, the old money in the state really is only coming from one source, and that is the Rasmuson family. Mr. Rasmuson died a couple of years ago and left nearly half a billion in trust for use for charitable and educational purposes in the state, and that is called the Rasmuson Foundation. He was the owner of the largest bank in the state, the National Bank of Alaska, which now has been sold to Wells Fargo.

That foundation has played a major role in putting a spotlight on Alaska for the nation's foundations. As a result, our use of foundation monies has been proportionally lower probably than any other place in the nation. That's beginning to change and should change because, as in other states, we're seeing the kind of funding exigency that the tax crunch and the collapse in the economy in some areas is causing. And to boot we have a very stingy legislature

and governor, and they've always been that way, [Laughter] and arts cultural funding have not been very high on the priority list.

Alaska has the largest land mass, about one-fourth the size of the U.S. It has one of the smallest populations, a little more than 650,000 people in that territory. About three-quarters of this population is concentrated in three cities: Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, with half of that in Anchorage alone. Anchorage has nearly 300,000 people.

About seventeen percent of the population is Native American, and we live mostly in the rural areas of the state. However, there is beginning to be an in-migration from the approximately 300 villages in rural Alaska to urban areas where the living possibilities are thought to be better.

Customarily Native people have lived largely off the land. Alaska has been very kind to Native people in terms of its largesse wildlife-wise – many salmon, many bear, moose, caribou, the whales and the seals and the other sea mammals are there as well. So living has been relatively easy, but it always had to be combined with a little cash.

Villages survived very well if they had a little cash income in order to buy the flour and sugar and coffee and so forth. But they could live off the land. That's called subsistence living. You may hear it from time to time in the news about Alaska. It's known as "hunting and fishing rights" in the lower forty-eight among other Indian groups.

So in 1971 Congress decided to settle the long-standing land claim of the Alaska Native people. When the Treaty of Russia occurred in 1867 or so, the promise was made that title to the land that the aboriginal people were occupying would be transferred at some point by the will of Congress.

That never occurred until oil was discovered at Prudhoe Bay. They needed to build a pipeline, and so the right thing was done, you might say, for the wrong reasons. The land settlement was made because the clouded title had stopped the oil industry from putting a pipeline down across the land. Bankers simply wouldn't finance an oil line across contested land with a clouded title.

So it happened. About a billion dollars was paid for lands that couldn't be returned, and about forty million acres, or about one-ninth of the state was returned to the Native peoples. That was contributed to corporations, tribal members were made shareholders, and that has been a fairly interesting experience. There have been



some shortcomings, but there have been a lot of successes.

The tools to do social and educational and other social uplifting things sprung from that settlement. A lot of these nonprofits that did healthcare, housing, job training, placement, education, and so forth were started at that time. So that's been Alaska over the last forty or fifty years.

One of the things we did in the Cook Inlet area was to form the Koahnic Broadcast Corporation. It was thought at the time that what was needed to create a better understanding among the races, to educate our children about our culture, our language, and our history, could be a radio station. That got expanded into a training program as well and into the creation of our own programs as we went forward.

We're now expanding nationally. It has been hard going. The cash flows of a public radio, nonprofit format aren't terrific. If you were NPR, they might be a little better because your stations are located in fairly wealthy areas. The NPR dues-paying stations, membership-paying stations are located in places like Chicago and New York and Los Angeles and can pay some pretty hefty station fees in order to buy the NPR programming.

The stations we service, though, are mainly tribal stations. We service about thirty-two tribally-oriented stations across the nation. We have about 274 stations carrying some of our programming. Our programming includes Native America Calling, National Native News, Earthsongs. We do Native Were the Day; we do storytelling. It's an interesting addition to the airwaves of our nation. It adds another set of voices that brings out the richness of the diversity that our nation can enjoy.

It also serves education purposes, not only for our children but for the community at large about the fact that we're all human beings. While we may be different, we can now learn about each other and our cultures and perhaps get along a little better and understand each other a little better. It's really an important service to the country. But the problem really in expansion, and it should expand, is, again, the cash situation.

Koahnic derives its funding currently from the following sources: about forty-one percent comes from federal grants. Most of that, about thirty-five points of that, comes from the CPB which has made a limited grant, a five-year grant, to the entity Koahnic to help US to expand nationally. But that may not be enough, and we're urging them to do more.

About twenty-three percent comes from underwriting. We have supporters of the station, many of them corporate, that do underwriting, which is the same as advertising in a commercial station.

The third largest source of money is foundations: about fifteen percent of the operating monies for programs and creation of new programs comes from foundations. That slipped in 2000 pretty dramatically with the loss of a major foundation funder, but has since been slowly going in the right direction again. Currently in the last four years on the average our foundation funding has been about ten percent of our overall budget.

The rest of the funding comes ten percent from membership and fundraising and nine percent from non-cash, which are exchanges that stations do among themselves to get economies of scale. But the job now is now to expand further.

We're in Alaska, kind of in a strange way. We should be in the middle of Native America, really, which is the Midwest, and we're not. Yet much of our programming involves Native Americans from the Midwest and other parts of the United States. There is no real presence there. We have a presence now in New Mexico, but there should be at least a couple of other stations situated across the nation that have similar programming that reflect the culture and history and art and aspirations of the peoples of those areas.

That is the dream. That is where we would like to go. We'd like to expand programming but that is a tough uphill climb with the poor constituency we serve, and the membership dues being really skinny, and underwriting not being as it should, and station fees not being nearly what NPR is collecting. The upshot of all of this is that we will be relying more on partnerships and collaborations that we can put together among foundations.

Jaclyn, I introduced her earlier, is perhaps a leader in Alaska in that she went boldly out and represented Alaska, just called these foundations and showed up on their doorstep when she got an invitation to come. And she did. She has many friends out there now, and she needs to work that trap line again, I think. She's no stranger to it. But it's a good cause, and it's something that I think needs to be done, not only for Native Americans but for the nation generally. It adds another dimension that will be lost unless we can move forward.

The long-term liability, of course, will depend not on grants but on the expansion of membership fees, listenership, station fees, fundraising, and underwriting. And that will be, in the ideal



world, what will ultimately happen to Koahnic. It will be a self-sustaining organization, a national organization that provides this valuable service if it can, in the short term, in the medium term, bridge that gap with help from the nation's foundations.

**GARAY:** Thank you. I'm going to ask Stephanie to go next.

One of the things that we really wanted to do in this panel was to have somebody that is rooted in the host community speak to US about issues surrounding organizations of color in this very versatile and diversified community. One of the things that we hope by changing the locations of the Grantmakers in the Arts annual conferences is to learn more about different communities. When we were putting the panel together, I contacted some colleagues here in Seattle, and Stephanie's name came up again and again. So I'm very pleased to have her here with US and look forward to hearing her comments.

**ELLIS-SMITH:** Thank you. It's really exciting for me to have the opportunity to sit here before you. Listening to what my fellow panelists have already talked about really just adds a lot more fuel to the fire and excitement I have with the types of programs that we're doing here and the uniqueness and particular nature of this community for organizations of color.

A little bit more background on the organization and its genesis. The Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas was founded in 1999, as I said, by me as the founding executive director. My ability to do so is the direct result of the type of advocacy work that Marta has already talked about and what I hear that Dudley has also done.

My ability to conceive of and to put together an organization like this that is an ethnic organization first and foremost; second of all, an ethnic organization that has proven to be successful and resonant in a community that is predominantly white and non-communities of color. There's no secret that Seattle is not as diverse a place as Los Angeles or New York City. I feel that our ability to do so is unique to Seattle, and, I think, unique to maybe the way that we try to conceive of this organization, given the circumstances that we're in.

When I first saw the need for an organization such as the Central District Forum, one main question came to mind for me, and that was: Is there a place for an ethnic organization in the twenty-first century? An ethnic organization that is specifically focused on and rooted in a

particular cultural identity, a typical ethnicity? Obviously the answer I came up with was Yes.

But some of the discussions that we had amongst our board and certain key constituents in our community were: Is there a way that we can do that, that is reflective of this changing demographic that we're all reading about? Different ways that we, as people of color, communities of color, even think of ourselves, not even dressed as a collective, but also as individuals. How can we incorporate all of that and still do something that is important and meaningful to people that are coming at this from different backgrounds?

I'm going to skip a little bit and tell you the inspiration of how this discussion came about and how the organization came about as a result of those discussions. It came directly from my work with an organization called the Jacob Lawrence Catalogue Raisonné Project. For those of you who are familiar with the visual arts, the catalogue raisonné is a really important piece of work that is a catalogue of an artist's life work.

I was privileged and fortunate enough to work on this project with two art historians. This was the first time it was ever done for an African-American visual artist. It was a four-year-long project that we worked on, and my role in this was the visual arts coordinator, which means that my job was to contact and catalogue every single piece of original artwork done by Jacob Lawrence. That turned out to be about 1,100 works, and I had to organize photography all around the world. That was then put them in the actual *catalogue raisonné*, the compendium, the book, and I dealt with the publishers and getting it just so, and the accuracy of the color representation for posterity.

In my work doing this, I had the opportunity to speak with people from all different backgrounds: ethnic, financial backgrounds, people that had Lawrence's work.

One particular woman, who is in Indiana, had one of his early works from the thirties. It was a very important work but she had kept it in a drawer for years, because her husband – and this woman was white – was not fond of African-American art, African-American artists, I'll put it that way. But it meant something to her.

She looked at that work and found something that resonated with her personally. But she did not want her husband to know that she bought it back in the forties nor did she want him to even know that she had it. She kept it in one of her own drawers.





She has since donated it to the Indiana Museum of Art. It's so important because the colors were preserved so perfectly because it's never been exposed to light. It's been used as a unique piece in looking at the types of range of colors that Jacob Lawrence would use.

That's a really great story and a really important story because of the way this woman looked at Jacob Lawrence's work. Just as in the way the Harlem art collector looked at the work that he maybe had gotten because Jacob didn't have any money in the thirties and gave a work of art instead of paying the fees to his dentist, and now this is the dentist's son, and he holds onto it as a personal, precious gift, regardless of what the insurance company would value it at.

These people from different backgrounds are looking at this body of work, this piece of art from an African American that means something special to them. Not them as an African American or as a white person, but as an individual. It happened to be the work of an African-American artist who chronicled struggles of Black people in the United States, and struggles that are particular to the African American experience here in this country.

What came out of that was an ability for him to speak to people from all different backgrounds about their own personal struggles and their lives. People would look at the work that had Black images, Black faces, particular Black struggles. Harriet Tubman, The Great Migration, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and look at that and say, "Okay, that's about Black people, but this relates to me. This really says something to me." It's from that experience that I come back to the Central District Forum and tell you how and why we are what we are.

We are a direct result of the work of the Civil Rights Movement that gave us this freedom to think of ourselves in different ways and to expand this notion of identity and culture. Jacob Lawrence is a part of that.

Our programs and our mission really are about looking at the African-American experience as a part of the American experience. You cannot have one without the other. They cannot be teased apart. As much as we would like to, for whatever convenient reasons we may come up with, they can't be separated. They are together, and there is no African-American culture without its component American culture surrounding it.

As a result, we do a number of different types of programs that try to explore these issues. Our mission is to challenge assumptions, provoke

new thoughts, and provoke debate about the role of African-Americans in American culture; our premise and our thesis being that it is central. It's central to immigrants, it's central to White Americans, and it's central to Black Americans and other communities of color.

Some of our programming over these past four years has been presenting musical recitals. We've brought a counter-tenor, Derek Lee Ragin, to do spirituals as well as Baroque sacred music.

We've commissioned two works of theater, again cultural appropriation and borrowing some ideas. One of our programs was the "Hair Monologues" that came out in May, which we borrowed the concept from Eve Ensler's "Vagina Monologues," and translated that type of program to Black women and hair.

We've brought the children's novelist, Christopher Paul Curtis, here last May and spoke to 1,300 kids about writing and the craft of writing and literature.

Some of our programs are about challenging assumptions, such as "How Central is the Central District to Seattle's Black Community?" which turned out to be more than we ever expected. But again, looking at demographic boundaries and how they define us as a people and as a race.

"How Central" was a really important thing for us because with our organization being rooted metaphorically in the Central District, it brought out a lot of issues that hadn't been talked about, mainly that the Central District is no longer Black. And, in fact, the Central District never has been Black. It's never been a predominantly Black portion of the city. The African-American population has been the prevailing force and cultural entity in this area, but Black people have never been more than about thirty-five percent of the population there.

How do you reconcile that? When we say, "This is the Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas. The Central District is the historic home of African Americans." It was just interesting. Well, you know, yes and no. And how do we deal with that, and what do we use, and how do we use that to think about ourselves?

Another program that we've done that was important for US was called, "Our Secret History, The Black Elite," which in the Black community is something that can be sort of continuous, talking about elitism and class and the prejudice within our own group about those that have and those that have not.



So those are just some of the examples of the type of things that we do to bring people together in looking at African-American culture as a part of the American culture.

One thing that's unique to our organization here in Seattle is that we have – and I can say this with confidence – is that we have probably *the* most diverse audience that you will find in this city. Our mailing list, the people that come to our programs, are about fifty-five to sixty percent Black, about thirty percent white, and a growing population of immigrants from Asia, and also particularly Africa, that have moved to the area, and especially the Central District, ironically enough.

Our audience is completely diverse, which again goes back and reinforces the value of our mission of looking at African-American culture as not exclusively for African-Americans but as a part of America in general.

You might ask, how are you doing all of this, and how is this funded? Our funding breakdown is about thirty-eight percent from individuals and donations, in the form of memberships, which are about thirty-five dollars a year. We have donors. We have board members that give as generously as they can, as well as people from the community.

But it's something that we work very hard on, and this is new for us. One thing that is, I think, key to communities of color and fundraising and keeping our organizations going, is trust. Building trust in a community, that we're actually serving the community, and serving them in a way that people feel is important to them. This is really just started for us, but I would say this past year and a half really getting more contributions from individuals.

Foundation giving is at thirty percent for us. As our organization gets older, our discussions are about, "How can we become less dependent on foundations for keeping us solvent and keeping us going?" Foundations underwrite our programs.

Our earned income is at about ten to twelve percent. Again, that is new too. For the most part we don't usually charge for our programs. We're trying to create more of a foothold in our community, and erasing as many barriers as possible to people coming to the things that we are doing. That also goes even towards ticket prices. We're slowly changing that and having more income from that.

Twenty percent is from corporations. Corporations and foundations are the only

categories for us that are steadily increasing. It's an interesting phenomenon for us.

One, I think it's because being here in Seattle, there is not a fully operational, steady African-American cultural organization in this city. There have been different iterations of some. They've come about and closed for a variety of different reasons.

We've been going steadily and doing about eight to ten programs every year for about five years, and it's something that our community in Seattle hasn't seen in awhile. The foundation community here, I think, is excited by that and has been very supportive of the types of things that we're doing.

We're entering a time in our evolution when things are changing. A lot of our organizational support was just that, actual organizational support, not necessarily tied to programs, but operational funds in small amounts. We don't receive any large underwriting support from anyone. We hustle and scramble and piecemeal together three, five, seven thousand dollar grants every year; and it's a lot of work for us.

But things are changing. As we're doing bigger programs, things that are one, either more high profile, or two, just the fact that the organization is here, that we're now five years old, we have more than three years of programming history. We're now in the running for some larger programs, and in the bigger fishponds that I assume you guys are all in.

As I start talking with foundation directors and program officers about what we're doing and why we're doing it, we get some interesting comments. One of the comments that we get is that our organization needs to be more and do more. Which is great. I mean I'm all for getting the challenge of doing more with what we have and that fills our mission.

Oftentimes what we hear from foundations that they want to support not just African-American cultural programs or African American art, but expanded out, that we've got to do youth programs. We've got to have social service components.

We're a cultural organization. And we do Black art and culture for Black art and culture's sake. Seattle does have a fantastic array of organizations that do job programs, that have youth components, youth arts groups, social service safety nets. That's all here. That's not us. That's not what we're about.



Our organization has a budget of \$140,000. We choose and decide what to do very, very carefully, because we don't have discretionary income to spread ourselves too thin. We do our six, eight, ten programs, and I like to think that we do them very, very well.

I'm not interested at this point in expanding our organization to fill some foundation needs of what philanthropists maybe feel that they need to fund. Because that means that the initiatives are going the wrong way.

Being here in the community, a grassroots organization, I see my job as coming to foundations saying, This is what's important to our community. This is what people are funding. These are the new things that we're trying. This is what's worked. This is what hasn't worked. And this is why. We want you to come on board and help us build on these things that are working. We're beginning to get into some interesting territory.

The other thing that we run across oftentimes is butting heads with our colleagues. We do a lot of partnership and collaborations in our community as well, where we work with other arts organizations in providing either content or companion programming to some things that they are already doing. From our end, especially at the very beginning of the organization's existence, it was important for us to do those types of things because we were allowed an opportunity to be exposed to audiences that maybe wouldn't have taken a chance on us in coming to our programs outright.

That relationship with our colleagues has now changed in that we do programs exclusively that are tied directly and tightly to our mission. And where we think we can advance what we're doing by partnering with another organization and leveraging resources and funds so it's more equitable.

What they get from us is what's jokingly called the Black Pass. That you do something with the Central District Forum, and you've got your Black Pass. You are now able to go to your funders and say, We've partnered with this organization and now we do X, Y, Z. We've got our outreach, and we've met our outreach goals.

How that works typically is that larger organizations get those outreach dollars. Then my phone rings, and I get the call of, "Hi, we're doing this program next week, and we need to partner, and to do that we'd like to have your mailing list and wondered if you could \_\_\_\_\_."

That's not a partnership from our perspective. That's not the way this works.

These are new things that we're getting into as the organization is growing and creating more of a foothold. This is all very new and exciting to me because I'm getting an education on how this larger national funding works.

I'm very, very proud to have our organization centered here in Washington State that was one of thirteen states that receive funding from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds for every grant and program that they had. The Washington State Arts Commission decided that they were going to take their Wallace funds and, instead of distributing it in the traditional ways that audience development dollars are spent, they are going to give it to the organizations who are inherently doing the types of work that foundations really want to see. That is reaching a broad, diverse community, going into the communities of color, doing the guerilla marketing, the grassroots efforts, and getting people out, and hitting the pavement and bringing people in to cultural programs.

Washington State has given three-year operational support grants to not only our organization, but ten others throughout the state, rural and urban, to do just that. It's been a wonderful opportunity for us to understand more about national funding initiatives, what people are interested in. The very basic thing that comes out of it is that we have an opportunity to have unrestricted support, to do some of the basic operational initiatives and activities that we need to do to keep our programs alive and going and pertinent.

Then the question is, this is a three-year grant, where do those funds come from? One is the Wallace Foundation and the WASAC funds. And are we going to be able to sustain ourselves at the same level?

We use it all for leveraging. We actually have our first NEA grant right now, and we're moving more into program grants and our small operational supports. But it's an interesting time for us.

I would like to end this by saying being a young organization that's about people of color, African Americans in particular, we've got a lot to prove. Not only to our own basic constituents, the African American community, but to the community at large as well as to our funders. That we can do organizational development and growth as well as put on really exciting, innovative, and important programming that is about African-American art exclusively.



I would like to say that I'm happy to be here, and that this is an important panel, and I'm glad that we're being able to have this discussion. Thank you.

**GARAY:** Thank you. Okay, I know that I promised you all a question and answer period. So we have one final speaker, and then we'll open it up without taking that panel talking-to-each-other pause. So, take it away, Dudley.

**COCKE:** There's been a centuries and centuries belief that the essence of the universe and the cosmos can be expressed mathematically. If you think back, not just in Greek culture but in cultures around the world, that it will finally be reduced to mathematics.

As Marta was saying that the Caribbean Cultural Center is down just about twenty-five percent, I started thinking, that's exactly the same twenty-five percent that Appalshop is down. Here is an organization in urban New York and an organization in rural Kentucky with probably a variance of not more than two or three percentage points.

I've got three challenges that I want to express, and they're looking at this problem from three different points of view, but looking at the same problem. From the intros and from what's come before, it's a given that this work is about positive social change and all issues related to that. We talked about the Civil Rights movement, so I'm going to take that as a given, and talk about three particular challenges briefly.

The first is the artistic challenge. As a theater director and playwright it's now possible for the Appalachian identity to be confirmed in our region. This was not the case in 1969 when Appalshop began. But that confirmation is now available.

In 1969, if a big corporation like CBS had tried to do what they've tried to do in the last year, they would have succeeded. And that was to start a reality TV show on the Beverly Hillbillies. The idea was that you would find the perfect hick family, and you put them in Beverly Hills and watch what happens 24/7.

You can imagine this in any ethnic group that you choose. That show isn't going to happen because of the sense of the Appalachian identity that exists now and didn't then.

Our impulse as artists, our impulse in our ensemble company is to now connect the Appalachian story, which we've been exploring

for three decades, to other stories to create a bigger story.

Now the challenge is we're trying to connect our story to the bigger story, there are fewer resources, and we're asked to work at a much smaller scale. That smaller scale was more serviceable when we were working just on the Appalachian story. We need a much larger campus to present this other story.

Our last major collaboration along this line, and it just finished touring nationally for three years, was with a theater company, Pregones, in the South Bronx; an African-American theater company in New Orleans, Junebug Productions; and Roadside. So that was the bigger story, and we worked for a number of years to create that musical play.

At this very moment, when the aspiration artistically is to work on a larger scale – that had a cast of thirteen, which included the musicians – and when we were doing the Appalachian work, often we would, just because of our circumstances, have three people in the cast. That's the challenge we're facing and a lot of our colleagues are facing.

At the very moment when we're poised to make work on this larger scale, the resources and the ceiling is being lowered. There is just very little appetite now in the U.S., particularly in the presenting field, for experimental work, which just means new work. Challenge one. So that's that perspective.

Not only do I go around rattling the cup for money, but I'm a trustee of a foundation. I want to give a little of my perspective as a trustee of a foundation.

The way I see it, and the point of view I bring into the foundation, is that so many of the organizations, like those that we represent, could count on the people's money, public money, federal money, to a degree we never could count on private money. I mean we felt we had some purchase on that public money. It was not only the money, but it was the public leadership on issues of equity.

Now we have lost that public leadership – the leadership more than even the money – and that has left a big void in our operation. My challenge from this perspective is to foundations that need to recommit themselves to being independent and to recommit themselves to issues of equity.

If I'm in a foundation meeting and we're talking about social services, there is no real discussion



about whether we should help the neediest in social services. Well, why would you help people who are less needy?

That one's pretty clear. My challenge to Grantmakers in the Arts and the philanthropic sector as a whole is to recommit itself to independence. By independence I mean bringing all of that entrepreneurial energy of the for-profit sector along with all the good parts of the public sector, chiefly concern for all the people. And then leaving it.

The independent sector has this opportunity to not be politicking 365 days a year for re-election, and it has the opportunity not to be driven by the bottom line of profit. So the challenge, I think, that I would posit is to recommit to equity and to the independence of the independent sector.

The perspective I want to bring is the global perspective. By the global perspective I mean both the perspective within our national borders and exterior to our national borders.

I think Marta was talking earlier about the Reagan administration. As we all know it was 1984 when Reagan pulled the U.S. out of UNESCO. In that act he signaled that we were moving into a period of cultural isolationism. And it was a very clear signal. Nobody missed it except maybe us in the U.S. *[Laughter]*

The interesting thing is that that pulling out of equity internationally was the mirror image exactly of U.S. pulling out nationally. So the two have become entwined ever since that period.

The challenge I put forward is that we reconnect to the international community wherever we find it. If the need for that is not clear to the American people and to our leaders at this point, I don't know what could happen that could make us see it any plainer.

**GARAY:** Thank you. Any questions, comments?

**SNYDER:** I just want to expand on something that Dudley said. Through the research that we've done at Dance/U.S.A, we've found in San Francisco and D.C. that not only are the national funders not dealing with the communities of color, but even at the local level, funders are ignoring it. The dance communities in these particular cities are under-recognized, under-supported, and below the radar screen. It's both at the national and at the local level.

To point out something that Dudley just said, I think that given the circumstances we're dealing with now, which is a smaller pool of

funds, retrenchment, it's going to be increasingly difficult for funders and the Euro-White dance community, particularly the dance, to accept a shift in funding support to dance communities of color.

That debate is going to be, I don't want to say vicious, but it's going to be very challenging. We've got to find a way to make it possible for the equity to be there despite the fact that there will be fewer resources, at least for the time being. But it's going to be a tough struggle.

**COCKE:** If I could make one comment on that. I think one of the opportunities in equity is serving a broad audience of the American people. I know in professional theater, it's about the top fifteen percent in education and income that the typical professional theater serves. That leaves a lot of people out. To redefine ourselves around the people, sort of the E Pluribus notion, I think it's an opportunity.

**DICKERSON:** Just one other comment, and that is that for the majority institutions, the funding that they have received for outreach was also seen as an imposition on their fundamental mission.

**COCKE:** That's right.

**DICKERSON:** That this is something that I must do. Now that they're also facing very difficult times, and are having to cut back, these are the programs that are seen as fringe programs. So we want you to continue giving us these dollars, but we don't want to have the obligation to make these dollars serve the communities that have historically been under-served and for whom we've been asked to broaden our attention to include.

You're being squeezed at both places. The institutions that have natural affinity, concern, obligation, and mission to really address communities of color – their audiences, their artists – do not have the resources to do it. The small place that we were given in major institutions is also being eliminated. The artists, as a result, can't find support and nurturance for their work in either of those arenas.

**BYRD:** What you're just saying, in a sense that's the debate that August Wilson and Rob Brustein had. "Come Home New York" was about a national Black theater. Should the money be going to launch the major cultural institutions or should it be going to places in the African-American community that are actually producing the work?

Which leads me to this question about funding. How do I say this? There's a history of what I call



welfare mentality in this country. On the social level, one of the ways during the Civil Rights Movement, and at the beginning of this post-Civil Rights era, was that people were in a sense “paid off.” Now here’s some money, and now shut up and stop complaining because we’re doing this. Here’s some housing, here’s some this, here’s some that.

The question I have is, Do you think that we have not focused on how to develop philanthropy within those communities? So that, in fact, like Stephanie’s organization – and Seattle has a fairly large middle-class Black community, do they actually give at the same level that whites do? So that’s my question.

**ELLIS-SMITH:** I think that’s a very good point, Donald. To be totally honest, I would say that I’m up in the air about that.

When I talked about that funding breakdown of our organization, I mentioned that about thirty-eight percent of our funding comes from individuals. I also mentioned this term trust.

In this particular community, and I’ll speak just on Seattle, there is a sizable middle-class Black community, and it does give on a comparable level to its white counterpart. However, I would say that I can’t go to this average Black middle-class arts patron, in our first year of inception and say, “We’re doing this program, and this is about Black arts. Would you be a supporter?” That doesn’t really work.

It literally takes some time. It takes a lot of consistency in producing the types of programs. In our community and what we experience, it’s a lot of checking each other out and making sure that where they’re going to put their money is really going to be what I think people want. Fundraising in the Black community is not exactly comparable to that of the larger community.

We’ve started talking about these issues with small ad hoc funding groups locally here with other foundations. An old hat that I was wearing is that I was a commissioner on the Washington State Arts Commission, and also with Artist Trust, where Claudia was my colleague. We did talk about these issues of philanthropy and garnering these dollars and the support on our own from within the community. Right now there are some studies and focus groups and discussions going on, at least in the Seattle area, addressing that issue that you just brought up.

**GARAY:** I would say, Amina, and you can speak to this, there are affinity groups, as they’re called, of the Council on Foundations per major cultural

sector. Some studies have been done within those groups, and I can speak to Hispanics in Philanthropy because that’s the group that I participate in.

They’ve done some fairly extensive research on giving patterns of Hispanics. They are not dissimilar statistically to the overall population; however, where those dollars wind up don’t tend to be arts and culture programming. I think that’s probably, anecdotally at least, the same thing for other ethnic sectors. There are very generous individual giving patterns in our communities, they just don’t happen to go by and large into the arts.

**ELLIS-SMITH:** Church and families.

**HUHDORF:** I worked on the United Way campaign in Anchorage one year not long ago, and this may not be relevant to the national statistic, but we found that the middle and lower income people of the community gave at a higher rate than the upper income people did. It was close to ten percent of their income, and the upper gave close to one or two percent.

**VEGA:** I’d like to address a point that Stephanie brought up and Amina. What we’re finding, at least in New York and it’s getting broader because of the demographic shift, is a lot of the larger organizations have co-opted the programming of culturally specific organizations. A couple of years ago it was, “Give me your mailing list.” But now it’s really programming that is sort of global.

**ELLIS-SMITH:** World cultures.

**VEGA:** World cultures. I mean you could almost look at any major institution, it has a world cultural program. To a degree the artists that are used within our institutions are used in a larger venue on the world cultures that creates another dynamic. These artists are then presented out of context, out of cultural context. And also are competing for similar audiences.

That discussion going forward for all of our institutions is what is the work that’s being done? Is it grounded in the issues that affect community? Will it impact the civil society and in what way? If we don’t have those discussions, the deteriorating civil society that we’re experiencing will heighten. We just got back into UNESCO, right? But in the global picture, what is the discussion? If arts are not honored here, will they be honored as we enter a global dialogue?

**COCKE:** Let me say to Donald’s question that there’s a large number of donors to our



organization in Appalachia, but there's no upper class, and there's a very thin middle class, even thinner now than it was ten years ago. So while you have a very large number of donors, the donation is small.

Now, if Roadside Theater was to cease to have any income tomorrow, we would be taken in by the community. We already sing a lot in churches. There is a whole informal barter culture that exists. We would be taken right into the church, and it would work in a barter way. Already for years we've been asked to sing at funerals and so forth.

We would be enfolded by the community, but in that enfoldment we would not have the opportunity to tell this larger American story. That is the story that we lean to, that we yearn towards, because we know every time we pick up a banjo, that we are part African as we play that banjo in Appalachia.

That's what would end for us, and that's why the not-for-profit sector has a responsibility and a very important role to play in a democratic culture.

**GARAY:** I'm going to take one more question, and remind everybody that Spider Kedelsky, the director of Town Hall, will give us a very brief background on this center and a very, very brief tour, and then we'll come back and do Donald's portion of the event.

**AUDIENCE:** I just want to piggy-back on Marta's comment. I was told that foundations do not have the capacity as an organization to do multicultural programming. Who's on their board? Who's on their staff? Do they have a track record of doing that? Do we need to look at some other way to fund those programs? There's definitely a need for the programs in the community.

**GARAY:** I think that that doesn't happen very often. Interestingly, corporations because they have paying customers, tend to look at those demographic issues probably much more keenly than most foundations, which, with some notable exceptions, are populated by rich white people who knew the person who left the money. Unless program officers or other people who work there keep bringing these issues up, it's not part of the mentality at the highest level.

**AUDIENCE:** That's why I brought it up.

**DICKERSON:** Not to belabor it, but even when the program officers bring it forward, the decision making finally is with the board.

**GARAY:** I'd like to thank all the panelists and the audience.

**INTRODUCTION:** It really was a pleasure to produce and present this great educational program as well as some of the most dynamic choreography that I've had the pleasure to present.

One of the major projects for Donald Byrd's company was a very ambitious project called "The Harlem Nutcracker." If I'm not mistaken, the original theory behind the project, outside of creating a lovely work of art, was for that project to become the Nutcracker version to the company, the cash cow that would allow Donald and the company to take on other projects because there would be a fairly reliable income stream that would come out of it year-in and year-out.

It was a long road, and Donald is going to explain the ups and downs of that project and what happened. I'm not going to take away his punch line.

**BYRD:** I thought first I'd read something and then show you some excerpts from the video.

When I established my former company, Donald Byrd/The Group in Los Angeles in 1978, I saw it primarily as a laboratory where I could experiment and develop the skills necessary for the creation of what I called articulate, expressive, and bold dances. Believing that the theater is a place where profound emotional, intellectual, and visceral experiences can occur, I felt it was important to create works that engaged in experimentation but that also might be varied and broad in appeal.

When I moved from Los Angeles to New York in late 1982, I faced the task of introducing my work and choreographic voice to the East Coast dance community. With this came new challenges: building a New York-based company of dancers, gaining financial support from the philanthropic community, and establishing a new level of sustained artistic and program activity.

With the help of friends and the optimism generated by positive responses, critical and popular, to my early Los Angeles and New York work, I established the Donald Byrd Dance Foundation in 1985. Incorporated as a nonprofit, 501(c)(3), it was the administrative, financial, and fundraising entity supporting Donald Byrd/The Group.

With a board of directors consisting of close friends in the financial and business world, all of whom supported my artistic vision, our mission



began to evolve to what it finally became: to develop artistic works that are diverse and broad in appeal so that audiences can experience dance and theater in ways that may enrich their lives.

During the '90s the noted arts administrator, Michael Kaiser, was engaged by the company to undertake an assessment of the company and the challenges it faced in advancing its ability to grow as an artistic institution. One of the conclusions was that the company needed to work more actively to increase the visibility of the organization and its programs, as a strong public image being central to realizing its potential for greater earned and contributed income.

At the same time I was beginning to look for ways that the company could be more engaged in developing relationships with various communities, in particular African-American communities, as well as creating dance works that might speak more directly to these communities. The development and the creation of "The Harlem Nutcracker," a re-imagining of "The Nutcracker," was our attempt to fulfill, in an artistic product, these goals.

Premiered in 1996, it brought the African-American family into the Nutcracker experience. It was an artistic and popular success, dubbed an instant classic. It was reviewed by all the national print press as well as being the subject of several television features and featurettes, including ones on CNN and CBS Sunday Morning. There was even a children's book.

In May 2002, six seasons after the premier of "The Harlem Nutcracker," Donald Byrd/The Group and the Donald Byrd Dance Foundation closed its doors. The cash cow, exposure, and prestige we had hoped for with "The Harlem Nutcracker" had, I believed, sent us to our grave.

Maybe what I should do is talk a little bit about what I hoped would happen, other than the cash cow and the prestige and all that stuff.

**GARAY:** Maybe you could talk about why you thought that "The Nutcracker," which is a cash cow for many ballets, fans, companies, would apply to your company.

**BYRD:** One of the things I did when we were planning it, and when I was thinking about it, was a series of focus groups around the country anywhere from community centers in Brooklyn to the Hebrew Home for the Aged in the Bronx and in Chicago and Los Angeles. One of the things that I asked people was, What was the first dance they had ever seen? A lot of people said it

was a production of "The Nutcracker." That was the first thing they knew about.

They had stopped going to "The Nutcracker" because, particularly for African-Americans, it did not speak to their experience. They wanted it to be part of a family tradition during the holiday season, but what they saw on the stage didn't speak to them. I decided that I wanted to create a Nutcracker experience for the African-American community.

At the same time, the issue that was going around the country was this thing that the Christian Right had started talking about: family values. The message I got from that was, "Well, there's only one set of family values, and those are the ones that we say they are." Somehow the implication was that for African-Americans and other non-white ethnic groups, there were no intact families.

We were starting to hear a lot of statistics at the time about the single-parent family. That had not been my experience. My experience was that in many African-American families, perhaps most, both parents were there. There was also this other idea of the extended family that operated really strongly in the African-American community.

I also felt from my experience that post-Civil Rights movement, the African-American families and communities had lost a lot. That we said that we wanted to be integrated into the mainstream, and then there's a price we paid which we had not anticipated. One of them was the loss of our communities. Basically all the middle class, educated, professional people moved out; and the communities were left without an economic base. The only thing, in fact, left for people to do was to sell drugs.

Because in the past there were intact communities, and they were full communities in terms of that the doctor, the lawyer, the undertaker, everybody lived right there together. You utilized the services of those people because they were the only ones that were available to you. Then people started to see that, "Oh, I can go to this restaurant on this side of town, I can live in this part of town, and I can do this." They stopped patronizing those businesses, and those communities fell apart.

The question that you raised is the same one that Stephanie Hewley asked me at the time about the "Harlem Nutcracker." The thinking was, "Oh, you just want to do the white thing, but put it in blackface." And that's not what I was trying to do. It really is not only a re-imagining of it, it's really a re-thinking of what it means, of





what “The Nutcracker” could be to an African-American family.

For example, in the traditional “Nutcracker,” the central character is either Clara or Marie, depending on what version you do, and she is a child. And in my version, she’s a grandmother, because I felt that in African-American communities grandmothers are central to the community, and that the church is a part of it.

I also wanted to demonstrate through the production the idea that African-American families are loving, that they care about their children. There’s a lot of stuff about child abuse, and Black mothers slap their kids around. That’s a part of a fabric of things, but underneath all of that, and underneath everything, it really is about love. The whole point of it was about the family.

My relationship to my grandmother was really, really important. In a sense, it was a Valentine to my grandmother, whom I adored. When she died, I didn’t think that my life could continue because I’d never imagined my life without her. She gave me a profound gift when she died: That life goes on, that death is a part of life, that life does not end with the passing of the body. In “The Harlem Nutcracker,” death is an important component, and actually coming to terms with one’s mortality.

Some people say, “Ooh, that’s awfully deep for ‘Nutcracker!’” [*Laughter*] And the thing was to find a balance, because I think one of the things I was looking for in the production was in African-American aesthetics, there’s a broad range of things. Some of the stuff I’ll show you in the tape is completely out of the Chitlin’ Circuit. Like the Nicholas Brothers kind of moments and clowning.

I think it is important to preserve elements of that in the kinds of things that we present. So “The Harlem Nutcracker” was really an attempt to do that.

I thought, and it was in fact true, that there was an audience for this work. What there wasn’t, was there was not foundation support for this work.

**VEGA:** Let me ask you this. I just want to tell you that I was a funder in a public agency where we actually put in the guidelines, “We do not fund ‘The Nutcracker.’” Because we knew it was a cash cow.

But what I’m trying to understand is the African-American audience did not happen like it does with the white audiences that go to see “The Nutcracker” year after year?

**BYRD:** One of the distinctions in white communities is “The Nutcracker” sits on and it stays there. So that community comes back. There’s a whole bunch of stuff that happens over the course of the year in that community to support that production.

The “Harlem Nutcracker” was a touring production. We did not have a community that identified with the production in a very specific way. We tried to address that by adding a gospel choir and using the choir from the different communities. The children in the production would come from the community, and the first year that we did it, so would the orchestra, the band.

The music was from arrangements Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn had done of one of the suites that Tchaikovsky had done of “The Nutcracker.” I had the rest of the music, score, created in the Ellington style using melodies from the Tchaikovsky score.

So the first year, the lead players were professionals, and then we picked out local musicians associated with the commissioners. For instance, at Northrop Auditorium at the University of Minnesota, we used the jazz band. The same thing was true at George Mason University, we used the jazz band from the college to be the band.

One of the things I want to say is that the part of the funding that did work is that there were commissioners. We raised about \$500,000 in commissioning fees. The lead commissioner was Colleen Roggensack at Arizona State University. I don’t remember what the presenting organization there is called. But they gave \$100,000. We got another \$75,000 from 651 in Brooklyn. We got \$50,000 from University Musical Society in Michigan. Fifty thousand dollars was a combined group between George Mason and Washington Performing Arts Society. Fifty thousand from BAM, \$50,000 from UCLA. That part of the funding really worked.

When it would tour, the fees the first year were low because everybody who got it the first year were the commissioners. We couldn’t charge them the real cost of it, because they had contributed money. We did not have enough money for the creation really – all the money that we made from the touring went to pay the creation costs. We still owed money from the touring after we had paid for the creation.

Each year that we toured it, we had to charge more and more in order to try to pay for the current costs as well as the debt from the



previous two years, or three years, or whatever it was that we were still paying off. So it was never able to get on its feet.

One of the big disappointments in terms of the funding part of it was Arts Presenters. We put together, in association with 651, what everybody thought was an ideal funding proposal. The staff at Arts Presenters said, "This is the best proposal we've seen. It's so terrific. It's exactly what we're looking for."

One of the things I was trying to do was, my company was based in Brooklyn, to develop and create a relationship, a community in Brooklyn for my dance company. One of the things I had noticed was that dance companies that survived, in particular African-American dance companies, was that they had really strong relationships with their communities, and that people identified with those companies. You needed to create that relationship with the community if it was going to survive.

New York is a really different story, it's a hard and a different story because it's New York. But I thought, in Brooklyn it's possible to do it.

At the same time there was another arts partner grant that was going in that I was a part of, with Austin Dance Umbrella in Austin, Texas. So we called Arts Presenters and said, we know this other proposal is coming in, because I'm on both of them. Should we withdraw one of them? They said, No, that's not part of the guidelines. It's only about the quality of the work. So we put them both in, and "The Harlem Nutcracker" was denied funding, and the smaller project was given funding. That was something that we were depending on to help make up the difference.

I will say that part of the problem was that we had an inexperienced management team with no prior experience managing large-scale productions. That was a big problem.

Because after the funding wasn't looking the way it needed to look, we really needed somebody to say, "Wait a second. It was budgeted at \$1 million. We only got \$750,000, what you going to do?"

They didn't say that. They said, Well, I think we can do it, and blah, blah, blah. And I'd go, Yeah, yeah, I believe in it! I want to make a difference.

One of the hardest things is saying how naïve and stupid I was. I just want to make a difference, I want to make a contribution. It cost me, wanting to make a contribution, because when it didn't look like it would work, everybody else

disappeared, and there I was left stuck, holding it. But I went along with it.

**VEGA:** I was in New Jersey at the time you were there and another thing that really worked, and it was interesting to see, was that a lot of proposals coming from smaller choirs, dance companies, or musicians who were participating in "The Harlem Nutcracker," were being funded to participate.

**BYRD:** A lot of them were really successful. If you look at University Musical Society and the stuff that they put out, and the impact that they think that it's had on their audience and stuff, everybody benefited except me. *[Laughter]* I mean really! The band made money! They made so much money that Joe Mallila would say, "Here, these are the dates we want next year." And we'd say, "We don't know if there's going to be a next year."

I don't know if I have any regrets about it, because I learned from it. The jury is still out. Because it, in fact, frightened me. I've always thought of myself as being fearless. And it scared me.

It scared me because, first of all, it made me see and realize people don't always see the world the way I do. I thought they did. If I'm enthusiastic enough, if I'm blah, blah, blah enough, they'll come around. They'll see it. And they don't.

They went home and went to bed, and I would stay up all night worrying about how to make it work. And people had their lives. So my naiveté, I've had to deal with. Sometimes my rah-rah enthusiasm for things, I have to step back from.

The thing that I think really worked about it was I realized that it made a difference in people's lives, it really did. I mean not just these organizations that it served, but individuals.

For example, this summer I was doing a workshop in New York and there was a young boy in the class who was absolutely one of the most spectacular dancers I have ever seen in my life. I was just blown away when I saw this boy.

I asked him what his name was and he told me and said, "I'm at Juilliard, but I'm going to leave 'cause I got a job to go dance in Spain." And he says, "You may not remember me." And I go, "No." He goes, "I was in 'The Harlem Nutcracker,' I was one of the little boys in 'The Harlem Nutcracker'."

A bunch of the kids that were in it have gone on to study dance and work professionally. The most profound experience I had was at a Sunday matinee in Pittsburgh. The tickets in the



orchestra in Pittsburgh, I think were 65 bucks. And there were all these fathers, these Black fathers with kids, sitting in the orchestra in these \$65 seats.

These kids were dressed, and they looked fantastic. The fathers were so proud. To see that, that was the most gratifying experience. That's what we needed a picture of, not the stuff on the stage, but what was going on in that audience.

In fact, that was what we had desired for this whole thing, and we were hoping that the foundations would see that it had the possibility of doing that. They didn't get it. They didn't see it, or it was not important. Even though we thought we were doing everything that they told us we needed to be doing.

I have some theories about that. I'll put it in somebody else's mouth because they also said it. The head of arts and culture of a very large national foundation said that the perception probably was that we were perceived like an organization of color even though we weren't primarily an organization of color.

As Marta was saying about the ghetto art, the amount of money that was available to us was the ghetto amount. What we needed and what we were applying for was more than the ghetto amount. Nobody was going to take the chance to do that. They said, "The project's too big for you. You can't do it." Even though we had already raised \$500,000 and had six or seven of the largest and most prestigious presenters in the country backing the project.

So it just raised a whole bunch of questions to me about what is the thinking on the foundation level about projects that actually are designed to reach African-American communities. I don't know what they are.

Maybe what I should do is show you some things, and then you can ask some more questions. The first thing I want to show is one of the choirs in the party scene. You know those touring companies that were going around doing stuff like "The Living Room" and "The Beauty Shop" and all that?

**VEGA:** He made a ton of money.

**BYRD:** He made a ton of money, right. People were from the National African American Theatre. That was the National African American Theatre in a lot of ways. So they're in the party scene.

[Music]

**BYRD:** The choirs from Detroit became a permanent ensemble after this, in that they still perform now.

One of the interesting things was that the choirs, because they were church choirs, found this music really hard to learn to sing. But we wanted them to sing it in a gospel style. We ended up having to send somebody to each one of the communities to work with them ahead of time to make sure that they learned the music and help them make the transition from the way they were used to singing, but having that influence.

As I said, we picked up each choir in each community. When we would return the next year, we already had a relationship with them and they were ready to do it.

[Music]

**BYRD:** I had a lot of mourning about a lot of stuff that's related to this. When I came to Seattle I took over another company here called Spectrum Dance Theatre, which is a community-based school. What I've been trying to do here is bring the professional dance company up to national touring level. That's kept me focused about actually creating something else in a different kind of community.

It's been challenging to ingest another mission. How do you take that new mission and make that yours? I feel that right now I'm at the point where I can do that. I can talk about this other organization in a way that I think is persuasive and enthusiastic, and I really understand the mission, and I've been able to create a vision for the organization out of that mission. In some ways that focus has taken some of the edge off the loss that happened before.

I will say, I don't often dwell in this place. I have some residual bitterness, because I feel that I was abandoned by the funding community for reasons that I don't quite understand. I just don't. I can speculate, but as one of my board members at the organization where I am now says, "Don't assign motive." So I don't know.

Some people have suggested to me that my style as a person contributed. I'm going to say it the way they said it, "If you had kissed ass maybe a little better, it would have been done. More help would have been forthcoming."

There have been some issues around questions of race. Sometimes I can be direct and blunt, and unadorned in my observations about things. Coming from a Black man, that might have



been difficult for people. I was unapologetic and uncompromising. But, I don't know.

Olga, your heels are clicking [*Laughs*].

**GARAY:** My heels are clicking because I took on a very large project as the technical producer of an opera that looked at human rafters that leave the islands and come to the United States. It's the kind of subject matter that I thought would work very well for an opera. I hit some of the same walls that you did.

The reason I'm smiling is because now that I'm a funder, I can see more transparently why some of those walls were there. Primarily the walls were surrounding the fact that no one funder in this country tends to have enough dollars that they dedicate to an artistic program. Not even from the big companies is there enough to actualize a solid and comprehensive artistic vision.

You're constantly having to promise different funders different things in order to get the production made. It starts compromising the work after awhile, because this funder wants you to do a community-based kind of thing; this funder wants you to have international artists; that funder wants you to think about new work; and that funder is about new opera.

It gets to the point where you're piecemealing all of these funding sources together, each with its own strings attached.

But what happens to individual artists? A lot of what you encountered was reticence to invest large sums of money in individual artists, no matter what color. The lack of institutionalization was very threatening, and so that \$50,000 limit was about as much as anybody probably felt comfortable with from a foundation side. And Colleen put \$100,000 in because she owns Arizona and they all do what she says. But that's a rare instance.

I think that in addition to some of the imaginings that you think, there is also this other kind of institutional paranoia to fund the work. It's not trustworthy.

**BYRD:** Right. One of the things that we had hoped for was that this was kind of like a capital campaign. When you do the capital campaign, it's going to force everybody to do certain things, and then you're going to rise to the next level because you've been pulled together. The "Harlem Nutcracker" was going to do that.

But none of the foundations bought into that. We were only asking for money for the creation of it.

To me it's stunning that we got zero! I mean it's absolutely stunning to me.

Then the other thing is that we were partnered with BAM. Karen Hopkins beat us to the punch. Karen Hopkins already had the grants in to a lot of places, so they go, "We already gave to this project. We did it with BAM." [*Laughter*]

**GARAY:** It occurs to me that there was a dependence on the foundation community. Perhaps this was something that really was more of a sponsorship role, once it was up and running. That's the community that puts \$100,000 or \$150,000 in. I'll just tell you, by the time it came to Chicago, it was coming through a third party, it came to me with a month's time, asking for big dollars.

When I saw the product, it knocked my socks off. It should have been a massive success in Chicago. But by that time all the other dominoes stacked up against it, it had begun to fall.

**BYRD:** AETNA sponsored the tour for two years. That was amazing, they put \$250,000 in, just to us! Then they matched that with promotional things.

Part of the deal with AETNA we couldn't deliver on. It's very revealing. If you don't deliver, that's it. And we were not able to deliver.

AETNA had a whole financial services program that was directed towards people of color. They wanted us to deliver significant people of color to the opening night parties. They would pay for the party, but our job was to go out and find those people.

So, with the local presenters, we tried to. We said, we need help finding these people. And their job was to ensure that those people were at the parties.

It didn't happen. It was disappointing.

**GARAY:** In my opinion that model already existed in Chicago. That population had already been used there. It was more of a learning curve than in other communities.

**BYRD:** Also in Chicago, it only happened the second year. The first year it was a disaster. The second year it happened because the Ohio Theater hired a community development person to work with us. They put a lot of energy and time into it.

The audience came out, those church folks came out on Sunday right after church, they got on the bus and came to the theater. It was the most amazing experience!



What was really powerful about it was that it was like those experiences that I had as a child, when you go to these big church events, or these family things, and it'd be like thousands of Black folks, all done up. And you're sitting up in there, and you feel really, wow, this is it! This is what it's supposed to be about!

The first year we did it in an opera house in Detroit. There's an article I read yesterday that said there was a huge number of people who had never even been into the opera house until "The Harlem Nutcracker." And those people have stayed! They continue to go to the opera house. That's really significant.

People will often ask me, "How'd you get involved in all this stuff?"

When I was a child, two things happened. One of them was that I saw the Florida A&M Marching Band when I was about five. When I was six, I went to a youth symphony thing, and it was the first time that I had been in a room in an integrated group before. This was in Jacksonville, Florida. My mind just went like, wow! Look at this. All these different kind of people. Those people up there on the stage playing these strange instruments that are making all this great sound. Wow, the world is a great and exciting place.

That's how I operate, from the place that the arts opened up the world to me in a way where I was not frightened by the world and how big it was, but excited about the possibilities that it held.

When I would see those people, and those kids in the audience, and those families at "The Harlem Nutcracker," and those children that were participating, that's what it seemed like it was doing for them. I believe that it had an impact on communities.

The thing that I'm sad about and the thing that I mourn is that it can't be an ongoing thing.

**GARAY:** This is hypothetical to think about, but do you have the right corporate sponsor? Do you ever think you could be at the Apollo for a week in December every year?

**BYRD:** We talked about that. That came up last year, this whole idea with Dance Theater of Harlem. I was going to give them the production. If you do it, I'll give it to you!

Mickey Shepherd, who's with the Harlem Development and Empowerment Council, said, Okay, we'll see what we can do to work together. Do it at the Apollo for one week every Christmas.

I would give the production to anybody that's willing to do it, that would manage it and be executive producer on it, and make it happen.

I know that I don't have those kinds of skills and I don't want to put myself in that position. I don't think I'm suited.

**GARAY:** But you can still be the artistic director.

**BYRD:** I can definitely be the artistic director, that would be part of the deal. But I wouldn't even charge a fee for it.

**GARAY:** If you planned this with enough lead time, and every year that choir in Harlem, that dance company, whoever it is, knows it's going to happen, I think it could happen. I would certainly go back to talk to certain people.

I think you've put too many years and time and work into it just to let it go.

**BYRD:** Let me put another little thing on here. This is the opening of the second act from it, a little excerpt.

*[Applause and music]*

**BYRD:** You can see a lot of money got spent on it. Traditionally, the second act took place in the Land of the Sweets. We used a nightclub that was based on the Cotton Club in Harlem, that we called Club Sweets. The backdrop was based on the remnants, leftovers from some photographs of the Cotton Club, but also some Bearden painting to fill it in. There's a lot of information in it, if it ever gets seen again.

Do you have any more questions?

**GARAY:** I really have more of a comment that I want to open up to everyone. First of all I just want to say thank you for really pouring out your heart about what this project has been for you, this experience. It makes me incredibly sad that as funders we can miss opportunities like this.

You know the individual artist pre-conference was so much more emotional than I thought it would be. We talked about the limitations that funders have in funding the work that's happening. We can fund some of it, but there are limitations on sometimes even identifying the truly dynamic work that's happening. It passes under the radar, or maybe it's right in front of us and we really don't see it.

I'm wondering about the way that this whole discussion has affected the rest of us in the room. In some ways I feel like the panel is like one hand clapping. Where are other parties going to



have this dialogue? It started out about national funders pulling back and funders that have really large resources.

I come from a small foundation, where I tend to have these dialogues with artists. I can be moved and get those goosebumps, and know this is something we need to support.

I wondered what other people are thinking. I really appreciate hearing from funders who are from larger institutions and from ones that maybe had opportunities to share what was going on. The large foundations tend to be a mystery to me too. I don't exactly know how they operate or what they're motivated by. I just wanted to hear a little bit more from some of my colleagues.

**VEGA:** When I saw the roundtable title, the first thing that struck me was this should be a conversation you have with the entire GIA. To be consistent, the national funders of GIA tend to set the agenda. That's the reality.

It was really curious to me that yet this agenda item, which affects the national funders who set the tone in many instances, were not part of the bigger picture. This is a small group. This is a big issue. That's just my gut reaction to when I saw the title of the panel.

**GARAY:** Being on the board, the people on the board of GIA are very committed, and they try to be as inclusive as possible. Yet the composition of the board mirrors the larger society to a certain degree. A couple of us on the board – Karen and Amina and Dudley – felt that this was an issue that needed to be discussed. The opportunity presented itself as a theme session.

I would encourage you to bring this to the entire body. If a member brings it out, or several members bring it out, we as a board have to respond. This is about the America that we all live in. I would encourage you to bring it to the larger assembly.

**COCKE:** One comment to your question, this is a beautiful example of what I call "low fruit," because it's right there to be picked. So much work has been done on it, and it's just hanging there.

Yet large foundations, the foundation that I'm a trustee on is a large foundation, are not set up to work with opportunity. They're working in a very institutional, long timeline. And all this low fruit.

It's just hanging there ready to be plucked, and yet there's not the means. So it becomes rotting fruit.

**GARAY:** Again, I want to thank Donald. *[Applause]*

He really illustrated how decisions that are made at foundational levels have such an impact in the way that artists are supported and work gets made and the community served.

Thank you, Town Hall and thank you GIA for putting this together, and thank you for participating.

END

