



Brightening the Spotlight

THE PRACTICES AND NEEDS OF NATIVE AMERICAN, NATIVE HAWAIIAN,
AND ALASKA NATIVE CREATORS IN THE PERFORMING ARTS





This study was carried out by a team of researchers based at NORC at the University of Chicago. Core research team members included Clementine Bordeaux, Sicangu Oglala Lakota, Doctoral Candidate at the University of California - Los Angeles; Nella Coleman, NORC consultant; Jennifer Novak-Leonard, Research Associate Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and Gwendolyn Rugg, NORC Research Scientist.

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Foreword

The groundbreaking research presented in this report builds on a long history of working with Native artists and culture bearers. In 1999, First Peoples Fund developed a Native Arts Professional Development curriculum that is based in Indigenous values to serve its fellowship programs. At the time, it centered its content primarily on visual artists—the carvers, basketmakers, beaders, potters and muralists. Then, starting in 2014, a handful of performing artists and culture bearers began applying for the fellowship programs. In an effort to respond to their needs, we called upon our regional Native arts partners and skilled performing artists, to contribute to the adaptation of our curriculum to encompass performing arts. Five years ago, we deepened our commitment and expanded our programs by adding a Native Performing Arts fellowship.

Now, in 2022, nearly half of our fellowship programs are directly benefiting performing artists—like Asa Benally (Navajo), a theater costume designer, and Lani Hotch (Tlingit), a Chilkat weaver and storyteller. Though on completely different trajectories, Asa and Lani share something in common—both were inspired at a very young age by their grandmothers who were traditional weavers and storytellers. Whether designing costumes for Shakespeare theatre, or sharing ancient stories through community-wide performance, we recognize how they self-identify and support their desire to be authentic in their creative practice—a valued respite from navigating a very narrowly defined Western-European performing arts sector.

First Peoples Fund is one of the few Indigenous-led grantmaking cultural arts organizations in the United States with a focus on the broad range of performing arts happening in Native communities. We fill the gap that philanthropy and public arts agencies often overlook. We believe wholeheartedly in the culture bearers who are the carriers of songs and ancient languages. They are the dancers and sing-



ers who more than often work outside the dominant societal performance spaces and who give selflessly in community. We lead with a Collective Spirit® that uplifts and acknowledges the long history of colonization, while also centering the strength and beauty of our own identities and cultures.

The research for this study was conducted with the same Collective Spirit that First Peoples Fund carries in our own cultural practice. The research team led with a collaborative, reciprocal, and focused inquiry that centralized the voices of Indigenous performers from many creative forms. The team adapted to the challenges of a pandemic and a rapidly changing society in the United States. Additionally, the lack of Indigenous performance research in the United States allowed the team to build a broad and preliminary base that is both diverse and unique. We can learn from these uncertain times and embrace the opportunities that Indigenous performers share with us and that serve a wide range of possibilities for the future.

As we approach our 25th anniversary with a historic multidisciplinary performance entitled *We the Peoples Before* at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts—featuring more than 50 artists, culture bearers and educators—we encourage the mainstream performing arts sector to re-examine their relationships and expectations of Indigenous artists. We invite the funders and presenting organizations to lean into this report and begin to reimagine the future of Indigenous performance art. As this report beautifully reveals, Indigenous artists and culture bearers give us the power to connect with our past and chart our future, while challenging the limitations of the present.

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Acknowledgments

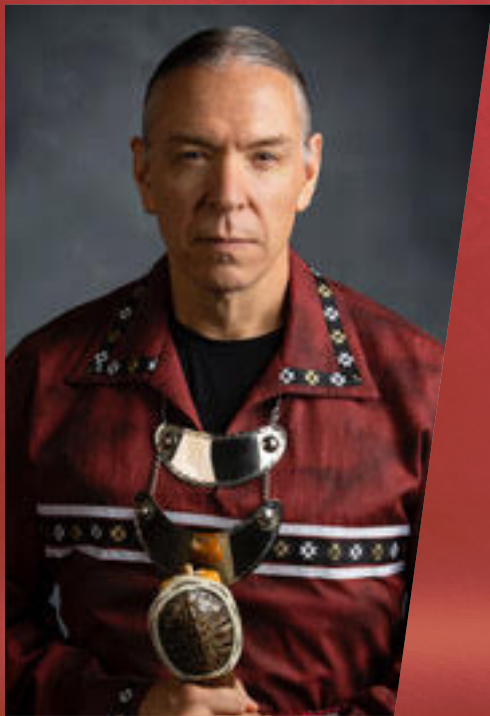
The authors of this report are grateful to the many individuals who contributed to this effort to shed light on the practices and needs that Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian performance-based creators have to continue their work. We would like to give special thanks to:

- The interviewees named below, and those who preferred not to be explicitly named, for graciously taking our calls and sharing their time, experiences, and insights to shape and inform this work
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Performance-based creators who shared their insights and experiences with the research team included the following individuals. The research team also thanks the numerous others interviewed for this study who opted to remain anonymous.

Delbert Anderson	Patty Loew
Megan Baker	Tara Moses *
Asa Benally *	Kalani Pe'a *
Elexa Dawson *	Ronee Penoi
Sharon Day *	Kenneth Ramos *
Ty Defoe *	Sheldon Raymore *
Talon Bazille ShootsTheEnemy - Ducheneaux *	Michelle Reed
Madeline Easley *	Madeline Sayet
Larissa Fasthorse *	Arigon Starr
Rainy Fields	Vicky Holt Takamine *
Jack Gladstone *	Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate
Anthony Hudson *	Joseph Brophy Toledo *
Kinsale Hueston *	Jared Tom
Emily Johnson	Tanaya Winder *
Edward Littlefield	Rhiana Yazzie *
	William Yellow Robe, Jr.

* Denotes a current or former First Peoples Fund Fellow, grantee, or award honoree



Executive Summary

In early 2020, a research team from NORC at the University of Chicago, in partnership with First Peoples Fund and supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, set out to explore the scope of performing arts practices that Native creators and communities are engaging in across the United States. This study was prompted by the fact that the importance of visual and craft-based forms of creative expression in and for Native communities has been well documented in research, yet comparatively little research has focused on the practices and impacts of Native creators who engage in performance-based forms of expression. The aim of this study is to shine a brighter spotlight on those performance-based creators. The pandemic, social upheavals, and calls for systemic change that have occurred since this research began underscore the importance of centering Native creators' voices as the performing arts sector, and society more broadly, emerges from the pandemic and grapples with how to begin anew.

This Executive Summary presents key findings from a full report describing **what performance-based practices Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native creators are engaging in and how and why they do so. While written for a broad readership, this report is especially written for funders and presenting organizations within the performing arts sector, so they can understand how to better support Native creators** moving forward. The findings in this report are based on insights garnered from in-depth interviews with 46 Native creators and other experts on performance-based practices in Native communities. Collectively, interviewees represented a wide cross-section of creative forms, geographic locations, and years of experience with performance-based practices.

Key findings are presented below, organized around the research questions that guided this study.

1. What performance-based practices do Native creators engage in?

Interviewees described engaging in a wide range of performance-based practices, either for live audiences or in recorded form. Regardless of specific creative form, a central theme that emerged was the current terminologies, definitions, and categories used to describe performance-based practices within the U.S. arts and culture sector are not always congruent with how Native creators see themselves and their practices. These incongruences included a mismatch in language and conceptions of what it means to be an “artist,” what it means to engage in “performance” or the “performing arts,” and what it means to consider one’s practice to be “traditional” or “contemporary.”

▶ **Some Native creators feel that identifying as an “artist” is limiting or incongruent with their cultural values and prefer alternative self-descriptions.**

When describing their practice, two-thirds of interviewees expressed some hesitancy about self-identifying as an artist. This hesitancy stems in part from the unique cultural conceptions of creation and creative work that Native creators may bring to their practice: some interviewees viewed their practice as being inextricably bound with what it means to be a Native person, and do not distinguish “art” from other parts of life, making identifying as an artist feel unnatural. Despite not personally identifying as artists, some creators described feeling a need to “code-switch” and refer to themselves as artists in scenarios in which they interact with presenting organizations or funders from the broader U.S. arts and culture sector, to align with the expectations of the sector.

▶ **Some Native creators do not see their practice as being about “performance” or part of the “performing arts” and prefer alternatives to these terms.**

Even among interviewees who did view themselves as artists, a subset did not identify with the concept of being a performing artist or with the notion that their creative activities primarily should be described as a performance because the term can feel insufficient to capture the cultural significance of their activities. Interviewees shared a range of alternative self-descriptors which they felt more accurately captured the nature of their practice and their identities as Native creators. Nota-

bly, over half of the interviewees—including many whose practices might otherwise be categorized using Western performing arts terms such as music, dance, and theater—adopted the self-definition of “storyteller.”

▶ **Although creative practices are often framed as either “traditional” or “contemporary,” these terms can be misaligned with Native creators’ own self-conceptions.** The tendency to classify creators as engaging in traditional practices or their perceived opposite, contemporary practices, suggests a binary that creators must choose between to make their work legible to funders, presenting organizations, and audiences. Yet interviewees described this binary as oversimplified and not always reflective of how they conceive of their practice. Identifying as a traditional creator in particular can be fraught because not all Native individuals have equal, ready access to cultural knowledge. Further, what engaging in traditional practices meant for interviewees spanned a wide range of creative forms and activities that extend beyond common notions of the traditional arts.

Each of these findings has implications for how funders and presenting organizations seek to engage with Native performance-based creators. Based on creators’ self-described practices, a key consideration for funders and presenting organizations is:

▶ **How can funding and partnership opportunities be more reflective of Native creators’ self-conceptions and cultural values, so that these creators see themselves as eligible for and able to authentically pursue the opportunities?**

2. Why and how do Native creators engage in their practices?

Interviewees articulated multiple motivations for why they engage in their artistic and creative practices. Some of these motivations are personal. Beyond these personal motivations, however, a key driver for virtually all interviewees was to impact communities—whether Native communities or a broader public—through their practice. Regarding why Native creators engage in their practices, interviewees described creating:

▶ **For personal reasons.** Interviewees described several reasons for engaging in their practice for their own edification. Some of these

reasons broadly align with the personal benefits that individuals from all walks of life may experience as a result of engaging in creative practices, such as finding a sense of fulfillment and meaning, and supporting oneself physically, mentally, and spiritually. Other personal reasons that interviewees cited are more particular to Native creators, and involve engaging in artistic and cultural expression to navigate their identities as Native people.

▶ **To impact Native communities.** Creating work with, in, and for Native communities was the single most pervasive motivation shared by interviewees when discussing why they engage in their practice, with roughly two-thirds describing Native people as the primary intended audience for their work. Interviewees described three specific impacts they intend for their work to make on Native communities. These intended impacts include preserving and revitalizing cultural practices within Native communities, supporting the mental health and well-being of Native people, and uplifting and calling attention to the work of fellow Native creators.

▶ **To impact non-Native communities.** Half of the interviewees described engaging in performance-based practices that are meant to be shared with broad audiences for the purposes of not just entertaining these audiences, but also educating them about what it means to be Native. Creators described three intended outcomes they hoped their work would make on broad audiences: challenging misperceptions, stereotypes, and racism against Native people; increasing Native representation in Western-dominant culture; and connecting people and imparting empathy on a fundamental, human level.

When creating with intent to impact others, the question of which specific communities their work is meant to reach and the intended effects they hope to have on those communities can play a significant role in shaping how they work and where they choose to present their work. Regarding how Native creators reach their intended audiences, interviewees described:

▶ **Reaching Native communities by being intentional about the content of their work, the collaborations they engage in, and the means they use to share their work.** Interviewees driven by the purpose of creating for Native communities discussed intentionally creating work with content and messages that would resonate with other Native individuals, even if it meant that the

work may not be fully legible to other audiences. Interviewees also described strategically seeking out opportunities for collaboration with other Native creators as a means of further ensuring relevance to Native audiences. Finally, interviewees described reaching Native audiences by intentionally seeking to share their work through Native-specific venues including educational institutions, community spaces, and remote or digital spaces.

Reaching broad audiences by being intentional about the content of their work and the means they use to share their work. When creating work for non-Native audiences, interviewees described shaping the content of their work to be educational and legible to people—often more specifically white people—who may have little familiarity with Native cultures. Interviewees described creating for these audiences as a double-edged sword; some were happy that their practice could play a role in educating and building bridges, while others described creating for these audiences as more of a necessity because of the reality that many performing arts audiences in the U.S. are predominantly white. When trying to reach broad audiences, interviewees explained the need to be strategic about the venues in which they present their work, including “mainstream” performance venues such as theaters and concert halls, schools, and community spaces.

Based on why and how Native creators engage in their practices, key considerations for funders and presenting organizations in the U.S. performing arts sector are:

- ▶ **How can funders and presenters become more aware of and better support Native creators' efforts to care for themselves and their communities through their performance-based practices?**
- ▶ **How can funders and presenting spaces be better partners and bridge-builders in Native creators' efforts to connect with broad audiences?**

3. What resources and systemic changes do Native creators identify as high-priority needs?

Because their ways of self-identifying, working, and sharing often go against the grain of norms or expectations within the U.S. performing arts sector, the opportunities and resources in place within this sector are not always structured to support Native creators. Interviewees thus articulated a desire for changes to be made to the ways in which funders and presenting partners engage with and seek to support Native creators, which could move the needle toward greater cultural equity.

Interviewees' perspectives on changes that could be made fell into three broad categories: changes aimed at increasing Native creators' access to current resources and opportunities within the U.S. performing arts environment; changes aimed at increasing the extent to which Native creators are valued within this environment; and changes aimed at reforming how performing arts funders and presenting organizations partner with and support Native creators.

Increasing access: Native creators desire more opportunities to thrive within the current U.S. performing arts environment. Because current means of funding and presenting performance-based work are largely structured to support creators and creative forms that align with Western traditions and values, interviewees described the current U.S. performing arts environment as being somewhat closed off to them. Changes that they pinpointed that could increase access for themselves and their peers included:

- **Increasing creators' visibility and access to knowledge and gatekeepers.** About a quarter of interviewees expressed a specific need for Native creators to have more opportunities to connect with gatekeepers within the current arts and culture sector—specifically funders and presenting partners—and the knowledge and opportunities they can help unlock.
- **Increasing access to administrative supports that help creators navigate and promote their practice,** including agents, managers, social media managers, grant-writers, and legal counsel.
- **Increasing creators' access to opportunities for professional development and self-investment in their practice,** includ-

ing training in grant-writing and marketing, as well as practice-specific classes and equipment.

Reconsidering value: Native creators articulated a need for placing higher value on their ways of training, working, and sharing their work. Interviewees described the deep respect that Native people hold for performance-based creators and the high value placed on their practices within Native communities, and expressed a desire for this same degree of respect and value to be held by those within the broader U.S. performing arts sector. They called for presenting organizations, funders, and audiences to reconsider the value systems in the performing arts sector by:

- Expanding the kinds of backgrounds and training that are valued and viewed as worthy of support, so that family- and community-based artistic and cultural training is seen as equally valuable as training that happens within Western educational contexts.
- Expanding the means of creating and sharing that are valued and viewed as worthy of support, with non-Native collaborators and funders increasing the trust they place in Native creators' ability to determine which types of artistic outputs and venues for presenting work will be most resonant for their intended audiences. Interviewees called attention to a particular need to elevate the perceived value of community-engaged practices—that is, creative processes and works that involve direct interaction and engagement with Native communities and audiences.
- Seeing Native creators as authentically “valued,” not just “valuable.” Interviewees expressed hope that Native creators will not be engaged by Western funding and presenting organizations merely to “check a box,” which can be tokenizing. Rather, they hope that these organizations will approach partnerships from a place of genuinely valuing Native creators' unique perspectives, practices, and impacts.

Building better partnerships: Native creators called for reforms to the ways presenting organizations and funders seek to partner with and support them. Interviewees shared that the undervaluation and dearth of respect some Native creators experience can negatively affect their working partnerships with non-Native



presenters and other creative collaborators. Interviewees described three incremental improvements that presenting organizations could make to their partnership practices to cultivate more synergistic working relationships:

- **Enabling Native creators to have more creative license** and to exert more control over their work, with partners putting trust in creators' decision-making.
- **Rethinking standard terms for collaboration**, such as contract terms and budget requirements, upon which partnerships between Native creators and presenting organizations are built, with a goal of achieving more equitable terms for creators.
- **Expanding approaches to audience engagement**, with a greater emphasis on attracting more diverse audiences, including but not limited to more Native people.

Interviewees also discussed ways in which funding opportunities as they are currently structured can pose difficulties for Native creators. They described six reforms that funders could make to better position Native creators to successfully pursue funding to support their work:

- **Streamlining funding applications and eligibility criteria.** Instead of placing the onus on creators to seek outside administrative help in grant-writing and identifying opportunities for which they are eligible, interviewees suggested that funders might make changes to how application processes work to

make locating, determining eligibility for, and applying for funding opportunities less burdensome for creators.

- **Making funding applications and review processes more culturally responsive.** More than half of interviewees recommended that more Native individuals—alongside more culturally knowledgeable non-Natives—be involved in crafting funding applications, doing outreach about funding opportunities, making funding decisions, and meeting reporting requirements.
- **Increasing accountability to Native communities regarding the outcomes of the work funders support.** Interviewees articulated a need for funders to engage in thoughtful follow-up with the communities in which the supported work is created and shared to assess whether the intended impacts on those communities were achieved. Interviewees stressed that this follow-up is especially important to avoid supporting projects that ultimately do more harm than good to Native communities.
- **Implementing more flexible grant requirements to better support Native creators' autonomy.** Interviewees expressed a need for funders increase the flexibility of guidelines regarding how, where, and when creators do their work and what creative outputs are expected, to allow creators greater autonomy.
- **Acknowledging and supporting a fuller range of Native creators' labor and needs.** Interviewees expressed a desire for funding that would support the entire creative process and acknowledge the full scope of labor that goes into creating and sharing their work. This would include accounting for the time it takes to produce a work, the extra time often needed for Native creators to engage in cultural competency education with non-Native collaborators, and the basic needs that need to be met for creators to produce work at their highest capacity.
- **Putting more resources behind Native-led community-building.** Interviewees expressed a strong desire for more support to work with and within Native communities. Specifically, interviewees requested that funders consider supporting more opportunities for creator-led community-based collaborations, for Native-led organizations doing community-based work, and for building new physical spaces for creation within Native communities.

MERRILL H. SMITH MEMORIAL



Introduction: Listening to creators' voices and learning from their vantage points

This study was sparked by a single question posed in 2019 by staff at First Peoples Fund: *What is the scope of performing arts practices being carried out by Native creators and in Native communities?* The centrality of visual and craft-based forms of creative expression in upholding not just cultural traditions but also Indigenous economies has been addressed and well documented in a range of studies both within and beyond the United States.¹ Yet, relatively little research has been conducted on the practices and needs of Native creators who primarily engage in performance-based forms of artistic and cultural expression.²

The impacts of the public health crisis and social upheavals that have occurred since early 2020 heighten the importance of learning about the breadth of activities Native creators are engaging in and how they are working and seeking to enable their creative practices. The COVID-19 pandemic has been especially devastating to Native communities³ and those working in the performing arts.⁴ As a society, we are witnessing and making renewed calls for social justice. Within the nonprofit arts and philanthropic

Terminology matters

This report shares the perspectives of Native-identifying individuals who engage in a wide range of artistic and cultural practices. Each individual used unique language to describe who they are and what they do. In some cases, this language aligned with Western descriptors of performing artistry, such as being an actor, producer, musician, or dancer, and in other cases, their descriptors extended beyond these bounds. Some considered their work to be performance, and others did not.

For purposes of brevity and standardization, the authors use the term “Native creators” to refer to interviewees throughout this report, and the term “performance-based practices” to refer to the range of activities interviewees engage in. However, these terms are not meant to fully encapsulate the nuanced self-descriptions interviewees shared. Where possible—taking into account overall clarity and some interviewees’ wish to remain anonymous—when referring to or quoting individual interviewees, their own self-descriptions and definitions of their practices are used.

1 First Peoples Fund, 2013; First Peoples Fund, 2017; M. Archuleta et al., 1994; Australian Government, 2021; and Parliament of Australia, 2004.

2 The most comprehensive work completed to date is a multi-part study on the performance-based practices and needs of First Nations performing artists undertaken by the Australia Council for the Arts. See Australia Council for the Arts, 2016; and Australia Council for the Arts, 2020.

3 As of February 2021, in Native communities both on and off reservations, the mortality rate for Native individuals was higher than any other racial or ethnic group and 2.5 times the mortality rates for self-identified whites and Asians, adjusted for age (Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Indian Health Service, 2020). With these deaths came the loss of Native language speakers and culture-bearers, making the work that Native artists do—and an understanding of the resources they need—all the more urgent.

4 In the third quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate for artists who work within the performing arts sector (defined as music, dance, and theater) was nearly triple the unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2019 (Source: COVID-19 RSFLG Data and Assessment Working Group, 2021). For more information, see R. Florida and M. Seman, 2020.

sectors more specifically, there are fervent calls to action for systemic change and holding those in positions of structural power accountable.

These social changes highlight the significance of First Peoples Fund's initial question and intensify the need to answer it by listening to Native creators' voices and learning from their vantage points. While recognizing the significant diversity across and between Native cultures and the lived experiences of Native individuals, and acknowledging the limitations of any one research study to fully account for this diversity, this report works toward describing the scope of performing arts practices being carried out by Native creators by providing insights into the following three questions:

1. **What performance-based practices do Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native creators engage in?**
2. **Why and how do Native creators engage in their practices?**
3. **What resources and systemic changes do Native creators identify as high-priority needs?**

In early 2020 First Peoples Fund and a research team from NORC at the University of Chicago set out to explore these questions. This partnership was built upon principles of community-based participatory research, a framework in which members of the communities on whom research is focused are full partners with shared power across all aspects of the research effort.⁵ For this project, people with direct knowledge of and experience with performance-based practices in Native communities helped shape each step of the research process, including generating the research questions, refining the research design, and offering perspectives on the interpretation of findings.

This report presents insights gained from in-depth interviews conducted via phone or Zoom with 7 key experts and 39 creators. The key experts were identified through the extensive network of Native artists, culture-bearers, and organizations that First Peoples Fund has built over its 26 years of existence. These experts represent a breadth and depth of experience and knowledge across multiple creative forms, such as theater, dance, and music, and/or

⁵ For more about community-based participatory research, see B. Israel et al, 2013.



deep knowledge of Native communities within specific geographies, such as the southwestern United States, the Plains region, New York, Alaska, and Hawaii. The experts provided high-level perspectives on and the names of potential interviewees within their respective areas of expertise. Based on the key experts' recommendations and supplemented by the research team's own compilation of potential interviewees garnered via internet and social media searches, the research team compiled a database of hundreds of potential interviewees with a range of backgrounds and creative practices. Given that this study aims to be inclusive of a wide range of performance-based practices that Native individuals and communities are engaging in across the nation, interviewees were then selected to maximize representation from a cross-section of creative forms, geographic locations, and career stages if pursuing their practice professionally, or years of experience with their practice if not. Throughout this report, interviewees' responses have been anonymized, and identifying features of interviewees have been omitted where requested. A fuller accounting of the research approach for this study is available in the Appendix.

While written for a broad readership, this report is especially written for funders and those within positions of power in the U.S. performing arts sector. As such, this report offers specific guidance for those readers on how to better and more holistically support Native creators.





1

What performance-based practices do Native creators engage in?



1

What performance-based practices do Native creators engage in?

Understanding the scope of performance-based practices Native creators engage in, and understanding how creators describe these practices, are imperative first steps toward identifying the best ways to support and partner with them. In interviewees' discussions of how they view themselves and their creative practices, a central theme emerged: the current terminologies, definitions, and categories used within the broader U.S. performing arts sector are not always congruent with how Native creators see and value themselves and their practices. This chapter explores key ways in which Native creators' self-conceptualizations expand beyond the bounds of standard terminologies. Crucial points of disconnect include a mismatch in language and conceptions of what it means to be an "artist," what it means to engage in "performance" or the "performing arts," and what it means to consider one's practice to be "traditional" or "contemporary."

Inapt terms, incongruent values

Some Native creators feel that identifying as an “artist” is limiting or incongruent with their cultural values and prefer alternative self-descriptions. When describing their practice, one-third of interviewees described themselves as artists. Some have always self-identified as such, stating that being an artist is *“almost something that you’re born with,”* while others described striving toward this identity, and only recently becoming *“finally confident enough”* to claim it for themselves.

The remaining two-thirds of interviewees, however, expressed some hesitancy about self-identifying as an artist. This hesitancy is not necessarily unique to Native creators: past research has found that creators of varied backgrounds—even those who have obtained arts degrees or actively make a living through their practice—can be reluctant to self-describe as an artist due to factors such as a perceived lack of integration into artistic communities or a perceived divergence from using standard artistic tools and mediums.^{1,2,3} Beyond these reasons, interviewees suggested that certain reasons for this hesitancy may stem from the unique values and worldviews that Native creators bring to their practice.

Making space for cultural values: “There really is no word for art.” Some interviewees outright refrained from referring to themselves as artists, despite engaging in practices such as music, dance, or theater, for reasons related to their cultural conceptions of creation and creative work. These interviewees viewed their practice as being inextricably bound with what it means to be a Native person, with any outputs that may be viewed as “art” by others occurring simply *“as a byproduct of what I do, culturally.”* Several interviewees even noted that *“there is really no word for art”* in their Indigenous language. Defining their creative and cultural practices as “art,” then, would be antithetical to the worldview of their tribal community, which considers these practices *“just integrated into everything, everything is imbued with beauty,*

1 M. Robinson and J. Novak-Leonard, 2021.

2 J. Lena and D. Lindemann, 2014.

3 National Endowment for the Arts, 2021.

Several interviewees even noted that *“there is really no word for art”* in their Indigenous language. Defining their creative and cultural practices as “art,” then, would be antithetical to the worldview of their tribal community, which considers these practices *“just integrated into everything, everything is imbued with beauty, form, spirit, all of these things that are associated, I guess, in English with the word ‘art.’”*

form, spirit, all of these things that are associated, I guess, in English with the word ‘art.’” Rather than siloing their practices in this way, these interviewees view them as an integral part of life: one commented, *“If there’s no word for art, all you can be [is] a human being.”* Further, one interviewee described distancing themselves from the term “artist” because its implications about intellectual property clash with their cultural values as an Indigenous person. By rejecting the term, they reject the notion of *“claiming ownership over cultural material...that I’m learning through transmission with wisdom keepers and culture keepers”* in their tribe.

The need to code-switch to navigate the U.S. performing arts sector. Despite not personally identifying as artists, several other interviewees described a need to “code-switch” and refer to themselves as artists in scenarios in which they interact with presenting organizations or funders from the broader U.S. arts and culture sector. One self-described storyteller shared that they call themselves an artist *“depending on the audience...if I’m talking to you know, people in the arts, then I would probably say yes, I’m a performing artist,”* despite fundamentally not seeing themselves as such. Similarly, a theater-maker reluctantly self-identified as an artist *“just because...this is the world we live in, so that’s what I use as my descriptor,”* though they described feeling freer in their practice when removing that label. And while one music-based creator commented, *“I am a performing artist in the Western world that we all live in,”* they fundamentally view themselves as a *“practicing to be the-best-I-can Tlingit person,”* as their practice involves the revival and adaptation of their tribal language and cultural traditions.

Interviewees described this need to code-switch as being especially apparent when applying for funding. Speaking about the application process, interviewees commented that *“oftentimes it isn’t necessarily [an option] on a lot of forms to identify”* in the way they would prefer, because most applications are set up so that *“you have to check a box.”* Interviewees then described needing to code-switch to correct for this lack of *“culturally specific”* framing. For example, one culture-bearer self-identified first and foremost as *“an educator”* because of the centrality of passing down cultural traditions to their practice, but noted that *“in the world of labeling...I always get labeled as an artist or musician or dancer,”* and recognized the need to describe themselves as such to apply for funding. Speaking of the extra labor that this entails, one interviewee commented that when applying for funding, *“I’ve had to tease and pull out certain parts of myself and leave others behind to fit into a type of box, a binary, for getting resources for a particular kind of project.”*

Some Native creators do not see their practice as being about “performance” or part of the “performing arts” and prefer alternatives to these terms.

Within the U.S. arts and culture sector, the performing arts are typically defined as those creative forms performed in front of live audiences and include music, dance, theater, and spoken word, alongside creative forms that are filmed or recorded for later audience consumption such as film, television, and other media.^{4,5} Even among interviewees who did view themselves as artists, a subset did not identify with the concept of being a *performing* artist or with the notion that their creative activities primarily should be described as a performance. Just as with their hesitancy to self-describe as an artist, hesitancy to identify as a performer can directly relate to the values and worldviews that Native creators bring to their practice.

More than entertainment: Making space for cultural values.

Though interviewees engaged in activities, either live or taped, for audiences, some considered themselves not to be performers or as engaging in the performing arts because the terms felt insufficient to capture the cultural significance of their activities. One interviewee stated, *“I consider myself more than just a performing artist. I consider myself an advocate for our culture, a steward of our way of life, the beauty of our songs and dances and...the*

“I’ve had to tease and pull out certain parts of myself and leave others behind to fit into a type of box, a binary, for getting resources for a particular kind of project.”

4 F. Ostrower and T. Calabrese, 2019.

5 For performing arts categorizations commonly used by U.S.-based funders, see, for example, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, 2021.

"I consider myself more than just a performing artist. I consider myself an advocate for our culture, a steward of our way of life, the beauty of our songs and dances and...the honor and respect of our traditional ways."

honor and respect of our traditional ways." Others rejected the term entirely, such as one theater-based creator who commented, "No, I don't usually use the word 'performing arts,' to be honest I'd never thought about using it," because to them "it feels more like you're saying it's entertainment." Distancing oneself from feeling like what they offer is mere entertainment was a key theme expressed by several interviewees, motivated in part by the culturally significant and sometimes sacred nature of their creations. A dancer who self-identified as someone dedicated "to bringing culture to the forefront" stated that when "we put too much 'theater' into [our dance practices]...we cheapen it."

Whether overtly rejecting identification with the performing arts or simply preferring alternate terms that they feel better represent their artistic practice, interviewees shared a wide range of self-descriptors. Some used terms such as "interdisciplinary artist," "shape-shifting artist," or "interweaver," hinting at the malleable and multifaceted nature of their practice. Along these lines, others used self-descriptions that encapsulated both their tribal identities and their creative training. These individuals viewed their practice as intertwining elements of Western performing art forms with their tribal culture or Native identity. Examples of music- or sound-based practices defined in this manner included describing oneself as a "Chickasaw classical composer"; as a creator of "Diné music," "Hawaiian contemporary," or "Native jazz"; and as "creat[ing] as a Lakota person"—each in their own way blending "modern-day music and genres with our Indigenous melodies."

Notably, over half of the interviewees—including many whose practices might otherwise be categorized using Western performing arts terms such as music, dance, and theater—adopted the self-definition of "storyteller." Summarizing their practice, one interviewee commented, "Everything that I do is storytelling in some form," while another commented, "If somebody was to ultimately winnow it down, like, what is it that you do, I'm a storyteller." Native scholars and knowledge-keepers have identified "storywork" or storytelling as a central medium for the intergenerational sharing of cultural knowledge, values, and practices.⁶ Highlighting the cultural values that are bound up in their the-

⁶ See, for example, J. Archibald, 2008.



In their own words HOW NATIVE CREATORS DESCRIBE THEIR PRACTICE

Community worker and seed-planter • Working with sound

Story weaver • **Dancer** • **Jazz musician** • **Poet** • **Multidisciplinary artist**

Choreographer • Practicing to be the **best-I-can Tlingit person** • **Set designer**

Costume designer • **Shapeshifting artist** • **Mentor** • **Director** • **Storyteller** • **Producer**

Drag performer • **Folk Musician** • **Interpreter of songs** • **Voice actor** • **Interweaver**

Body movement artist • **Agent** • **Spoken word artist** • **Actor** • **Composer**

Pop musician • **Creating as a Lakota person** • **Social justice archivist**

Theater maker • **Contemporary singer** • **Educator**



ater-based storywork, one commented, *“I feel like storytelling encapsulates all of my work a little bit better than performing arts does because not everything I’m doing is performative or needs to be performed.”* Another described how cultural elements are woven into everything they do as a theater director: *“I always begin any storytelling process with being grounded in ceremony.”* Self-describing as a storyteller can also be liberating, *“disrupting the settler modes of containment and logics of assimilation”* and thus *“creat[ing] space for us to just be ourselves.”* For these individuals, framing their work as storytelling allows more room for cultural values and practices to be upheld and celebrated. Yet they expressed awareness that from a Western perspective, *“when you think of ‘art’...it’s not usually storytellers”* that come to mind, leading them to express a need for *“acknowledging storytellers”* as artists within the U.S. arts and culture sector.

Although creative practices are often framed as either “traditional” or “contemporary,” these terms can be misaligned with Native creators’ own self-conceptions.

Interviewees also highlighted ways in which common descriptions of practices within the Western performing arts sector—specifically, the tendency to designate creators who incorporate cultural practices and identities into their work as engaging in “traditional” arts⁷—limited them in describing their work accurately. Within a Western arts framework, the tendency to classify creators as engaging in traditional practices or their perceived opposite, “contemporary” practices, suggests a binary that creators must choose between to make their work legible to funders, presenting organizations, and audiences. Yet echoing a key finding from a recent study exploring the perspectives of Indigenous and First Nations creators across Australia,⁸ and in the midst of broader reflections on the history and future of the traditional arts within the United States,⁹ interviewees described this binary as oversimplified and not always reflective of how they conceive of their practice.

7 For current conceptualizations of folk and traditional arts within the U.S. see, for example, National Endowment for the Arts, 2016.

8 K. Bridson et al., 2015. This report found that while both audiences and presenting organizations perceived Indigenous creators’ work as being strictly traditional, the creators themselves described their practices as extending well beyond the traditional.

9 C. Murphy, 2021. This contains reflections on both the heightened importance of supporting tradition-based practices on the part of the National Endowment for the Arts and U.S. funders more broadly, and the ways in which drawing a distinction between traditional arts and contemporary arts can complicate funders’ efforts to support creators and communities.



The limitations of the binary. Interviewees said they felt burdened by the need to decide to self-identify as a traditional creator because not all Native individuals have equal, ready access to cultural knowledge. This is due to what both interviewees and Indigenous scholars articulate as “settler colonialism”—the removal of tribal communities from their families or homelands, resulting in the forced assimilation that many experienced.¹⁰ For many Natives, settler colonialism has caused a loss of connection to cultural practices. Some interviewees described a hesitancy to identify as a traditional practitioner when engaging in a historical form of their practice that is not rooted in the full cultural knowledge of that practice.

Due to these complexities, self-defining as a contemporary creator can become a default, even if individuals do not feel it accurately describes their practice. Echoing recent reflections from other Native creators who engage in a wide range of practices,¹¹ multiple interviewees expressed frustration about this, stating, “Our work just becomes ‘contemporary’ for lack of a better term,” and that they only define their work as “contemporary” because they “don’t really have a genre that we fit into.” And if choosing to refrain from identifying as traditional or contemporary, interviewees expressed concern that they would be overlooked entirely, because the current power structures “invalidate a lot of the forward-thinking ‘obscure’ art that...doesn’t really fit the traditional or contemporary kinds of categories.”

“I am constantly experiencing that push and pull of, like, this is traditional, this is not traditional, can the two come together, can they coexist, is that right, am I diluting the traditional or am I strengthening it, am I evolving it?”

¹⁰ P. Wolfe, 2006.

¹¹ V. Hutter, 2016.

“I am constantly experiencing that push and pull of, like, this is traditional, this is not traditional, can the two come together, can they coexist, is that right, am I diluting the traditional or am I strengthening it, am I evolving it?”

Reimagining the bounds of tradition. What engaging in traditional practices meant for the Native creators interviewed for this study spanned a wide range of creative forms and activities that extend beyond current notions of the traditional arts. Some interviewees referred to their work as traditional but noted that traditional work need not be absent of contemporary influences. For these interviewees, the term “traditional” applied to practices rooted in ancestral knowledge *and* practices that incorporate such knowledge while still being innovative in form—particularly when using present-day technologies to create their work and connect with audiences in new ways. Some of these creators even connected with the term “traditional” precisely *because* they view their practice as one of “*constant innovation*,” which they understand as being connected to their tribe’s broader desire “*to become stronger, to become more connected.*” Other interviewees described ways in which practices that may not be viewed as traditional within Western contexts are traditional in their eyes because of their intent to honor and highlight the origins of the creative forms they draw on to create their work. For example, a self-identified Native jazz musician described their own practice as traditional because “*jazz jams [are]...a traditional sort of art, you know, they came from our African American ancestors.*”

Other interviewees opted to shed the bounds between traditional and contemporary designations entirely, with approximately half of the individuals interviewed for this study describing their practice as being a blend of both that could not be fully described using either term in isolation. An interviewee who engages in theater, acting, and playwriting practices shared, “*I am constantly experiencing that push and pull of, like, this is traditional, this is*

not traditional, can the two come together, can they coexist, is that right, am I diluting the traditional or am I strengthening it, am I evolving it?" Grappling with similar questions, an individual who self-defined *"as a modern Native artist"* discussed how their approach to combining traditional and contemporary elements is *"very fluid."* Along these lines, another interviewee pointed to elements of cultural tradition that they weave into their otherwise contemporary work: *"[Sometimes] I consider [my work] to be contemporary, but I think it does lean towards a mix of both in that it draws influences from all aspects of my ancestry."* As this individual suggested, this view of a mixed or blended practice also allows space to account for the intergenerational knowledge passed down over time; several interviewees described their work as being born from a *"lifetime of wisdom and knowledge—and not just one lifetime, but many lifetimes, because it's intergenerational."* This blending can become a cornerstone, and a central feature, of Native creators' work.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUNDERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The incongruence between terminologies used by interviewees in defining their own work and those in the broader U.S. performing arts sector raises a serious question: do Native creators have the same degree of supports as those whose creative practices align more closely with conventional terminologies? When applying for funding or pursuing opportunities with presenting organizations or other collaborators, Native creators may be unable or hesitant to describe their practice in terms that, as one interviewee stated, would *"contextualize [it] using the exact criteria"* that these partners may expect. Conversely, Native creators may not even be aware of their eligibility to pursue certain opportunities because they do not see themselves reflected in the verbiage used to describe opportunities. Thus, navigating the performing arts sector as it currently exists can necessitate making a choice between *"existing in multiple worlds"*—adapting their language and practices to meet Western expectations—or missing out on opportunities.

- How can funding and partnership opportunities be more reflective of Native creators' self-conceptions and cultural values, so that these creators see themselves as eligible for and able to authentically pursue the opportunities?





2

Why and how do Native creators engage in their practices?



2

Why and how do Native creators engage in their practices?

Reasons for why individuals engage in creative work are inevitably complex and multifaceted. In discussing their own sense of purpose, Native creators articulated a range of motivations for engaging in their work. Some of these motivations are personal, relating to navigating what it means to be a Native person today and caring for themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually. Beyond these personal motivations, however, a key driver for virtually all interviewees was to impact communities—including both Native communities and a broader non-Native public—through their practice. Interviewees also shared that when creating with intent to impact others, the question of which communities their work was meant to reach and the intended effects they hoped to have played a significant role in shaping how and where they chose to present their work. This chapter offers an in-depth exploration of the range of motivations underpinning Native creators' performance-based practices, and implications for how, where, and for whom these practices are presented.

“What keeps me going”: Creating for self-exploration, self-expression, and self-care

Why Native creators engage: To find personal fulfillment, support and care for themselves, and explore and express their identities. Interviewees described a range of reasons for engaging in their practice for their own edification. Some of these reasons broadly align with the personal benefits individuals from all walks of life may experience as a result of engaging in creative practices, such as finding a sense of fulfillment and meaning, and pursuing ways to support and care for oneself. Other personal reasons that interviewees cited for engaging in their practices—namely, engaging in artistic and cultural expression to navigate their identities as Native people—are more particular to Native creators, while also aligning with research that has found artistic creation to be a central means for individuals to explore a wide range of cultural identities.¹

▶ **Creating for personal fulfillment and self-care.** First and foremost, interviewees described their personal motives for creating as arising from a simple, inextinguishable love of the practice and the fulfillment it brings. As one interviewee said, *“It’s like air, it’s like oxygen.”* Several described their practice as their *“purpose in life”* or as their *“vocation”* and added, *“If there is a creator, God somehow picked me out and said, hey, do this.”* One self-identified musician described feeling as if *“my soul was filled up”* the first time they engaged in their practice and that they continue to engage to keep *“that feeling”* alive within themselves.

Relatedly, one-third of interviewees described ways in which their creative work was integral to their self-care, meaning their own mental health and sense of well-being. Creators described their practice as *“cathartic,” “like meditation,” “like reflection,” “what keeps me going,”* and what *“helps me feel like I can breathe genuinely.”* They also described their practice as being *“part of my recovery, part of my healing”* and *“a healing tool”* in addressing both mental and physical health struggles, and alternately *“a therapy,” “a tool,”* and *“an anchor”* in maintaining well-being.

¹ For an overview of research that has been conducted over the past two decades on these and other personal benefits of arts engagement, see G. Rugg, J. Novak-Leonard, and M. Reynolds, 2021.

“Theater is my number one way of expressing and being in the world.”

For some, a crucial dimension of this self-care was earning income and employment to provide for themselves and their loved ones. While *“there are artists...who have the goals of only creating art”* with no expectations of making a living from it, others described their *“situation of supporting a family”* as being a *“main goal”* of their work. For this reason, some felt that having *“a rewarding career”* was one crucial component of being *“fulfilled as a whole person”* and expressed gratitude for being able to make a living through their practice.

Creating to explore and express self-identity. Interviewees also understood their practice to be an outlet for self-expression and thus fundamentally tied to their identity, with one commenting, *“Theater is my number one way of expressing and being in the world.”* When describing why they engage in their practice, one singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist commented that the core of their identity is as *“an artist and as somebody who is like the [link] between...worlds.”* Another credited the success they have found in their practice as being due to how tightly *“my background, my cultural history”* is woven into their practice, which motivates them to continue creating and engaging in self-exploration.

Interviewees also described their craft as a means of exploring and interrogating their identity and what it means to be a Native person in the world today, with all its attendant complexities and tensions. As one self-identified actor and storyteller put it, *“In this day and age it’s confusing to be an Indian.”* Past research has indicated that engaging in creative expression can be an important means of both exploring and reinforcing one’s cultural identity, particularly among minority groups.^{2,3} Interviewees echoed this sentiment. A theater-maker said their practice *“helps me...reconcile my own experience because there’s a lot of contradictions in my life as a modern Native person who is not that traditional.”* A sound artist described how growing up *“off the reservation”* made them question their identity as a Native person and think *“I can’t fit in with them, maybe I’m not Native.”* But through their practice, they connected with other Native creators who also grappled with the same issue, and ultimately found *“that, if anything, this was our [Native peoples’] tradition to speak and write music in this way,”* which helped the interviewee resolve their own sense of cultural alienation.

2 P. Fernández-Kelly and P. DiMaggio, 2010.

3 K. Leroux and A. Bernadska, 2014.

Beyond solidifying their sense of personal identity, creators also described using their practice to interrogate and re-imagine what Native identity looks like today. A multidisciplinary performer commented, *“A lot of my work is concerned with kind of this idea of existing in between. I’m Native, I’m also a German American, I’m also gay, I’m also like gender queer, so I feel like I failed to fit into a lot of boxes successfully. And so a lot of my work is about that and creating... experiences that sort of undo our preconceived notions of the world, and how we’re told it exists.”*

“Community care”: Creating in, with, and for Native communities

Why Native creators engage: To make work with, in, and for Native communities. Creating work that reaches and serves Native communities was the single most pervasive motivation shared by interviewees when discussing why they create, with roughly two-thirds describing Native people as the primary, though in many cases not the sole, intended audience for their work.

Creators described this drive to engage Native communities as being deeply ingrained in Native worldviews: *“Ultimately that’s our base Indigenous values, that we dedicate our lives to others.”* A playwright and director echoed, *“To me that’s just natural, that’s Indigenous, like in the Lakota community you just, you never do something for yourself, you’re always doing it as part of community...as a Lakota person it’s important to always be giving back.”* Beyond feeling this sense of community service personally, interviewees felt that it was a common value held by other Native creators as well: *“For me, my work in the arts has always been mixed with this kind of sense of service, and that’s always been something that’s very, very deeply ingrained, and I didn’t really quite—I thought it was just a like, [me] thing until I started talking to other Native folks and I’m like, oh it’s a bigger thing. So it’s really hard for me to separate work that is quote unquote ‘mine’ with work that is for my community.”*

Interviewees described several specific ways in which their work is intended to resonate with and serve their communities, including preserving and revitalizing cultural practices, offering support for the mental health and well-being of other Native people, and uplifting fellow Native creators.

A theater-maker said their practice *“helps me...reconcile my own experience because there’s a lot of contradictions in my life as a modern Native person who is not that traditional.”*

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Creating for cultural preservation and revitalization. Having the opportunity to educate other Native individuals about cultural practices, thereby helping to sustain long-held and highly valued cultural traditions, was a strong motivator for, and crucial component of, the majority of interviewees’ practices. Interviewees felt that *“the demand is high”* within Native communities for such knowledge-sharing, because of the desire to retain a *“connection to our ancestors”* as well as the imperative of *“cultural survival”* in the face of settler colonialism and the U.S. government’s historic track record of cultural suppression and forced displacement from tribal lands. One interviewee explained, *“I try to remind people that 1978 was the year that we actually regained the right to practice our culture...so those people who...held on to it was a small group because it just wasn’t allowed to be done.”* Consequently, they described feeling a sense of duty to the *“generation who was taken away from their families”* for whom *“a lot of the culture was lost,”* and *“a responsibility to...maybe learn it some other way, you know go and seek out teachers, and then teach it”* to other Native people.

Interviewees work toward this goal by sharing their practice with and striving to be *“a good teacher”* to other Native community members. A young musician who creates songs in their tribal language that has few fluent speakers left described feeling some urgency to reach as many fellow tribal members as possible: *“The main goal is to get it out there, because I think they would appreciate it...everyone truly should be at least having some experience with this music and the language.”* Multiple elders shared that

they are *“in the dubious state of being just about the last person standing on the planet”* to hold knowledge about their respective cultural practices and that that is *“the last thing I want.”* One elder described the dissemination of such knowledge among tribal members to be the ultimate contribution they could make to their community and an act resulting in profound personal gratification. Having successfully revived nearly forgotten ceremonial song and dance practices within their tribal community to the point that community members no longer *“need me,”* the elder stated, *“I’m happy about that...it’s a reward that they don’t need me.”*

Importantly, several interviewees expressed that while they aim to pass on traditional knowledge and practices, they also expect that the knowledge will continue to evolve and grow rather than remain static or strictly historic. One elder stated that while they want younger generations to understand *“the traditional formulaic rules for construction and composition”* of their ancestral music practice, *“I’m all about just bringing all that up to...our contemporary times...to blossom or grow...in the context of this emerging global civilization.”* Several other younger creators who describe their practice as more contemporary also described incorporating cultural and ancestral knowledge-sharing into their work. Multiple musicians, for example, described taking up *“the story of our people”* through writing and performing music in genres such as pop and folk. At the same time, a dancer offers *“dance fitness”* classes blending traditional dance practices with modern exercise routines. The dancer finds this to be a less daunting entry point for engaging in cultural practices for Native individuals of all ages who did not have opportunities to learn them growing up because *“you just, you know, you start working out and then you see that you’re actually dancing”* and learning cultural traditions.

“I try to remind people that 1978 was the year that we actually regained the right to practice our culture...so those people who...held on to it was a small group because it just wasn’t allowed to be done.”

Creating to support health and well-being within Native communities. Just as many interviewees described how their practice provides personal outlets for *“reflection,” “therapy,”* and *“healing,”* so too did a large number of interviewees describe the hope that their work would make positive contributions to Native audiences’ health and well-being, thus *“creat[ing] in the long run a positive change for the community.”* One described their spoken-word practice as a creative *“form that has so much potential for healing...and can benefit us specifically as Indigenous peoples,”* and as having both *“personal healing”* effects for themselves and *“interpersonal heal-*

In describing their practice with terms such as “community care,” “healing work,” a “ritual of healing,” and “good medicine,” interviewees highlighted their intent to encourage and help other Native people persevere through the challenges they experience.

ing” effects for Native community members with whom they share their work. Several interviewees described specific mental health challenges facing Native communities today, such as depression and substance dependence, often situating these issues within the broader challenge of “*historical trauma*” that Native people have experienced and grappled with for generations.

In describing their practice with terms such as “*community care*,” “*healing work*,” a “*ritual of healing*,” and “*good medicine*,” interviewees highlighted their intent to encourage and help other Native people persevere through the challenges they experience. Through these narratives, they viewed their practice as providing “*opportunities for growth and learning and healing*” and being “*cathartic*” both for themselves and their audiences. A musician who manages and mentors other Native musicians described their practice of crafting songs that address “*depression, suicidal ideation, alcoholism, and substance abuse*” as “*storytelling with care*,” because they intend to help their communities persist through such challenges. Because of this, they viewed what they and other creators do as “*kind of like being a doctor*.” Another interviewee described how “*through our craft, through our art, through our ways of being*” Native creators can “*uplift our minds, uplift our spirits, not just on a personal level, but on a communal, on a community level*.” Simply put, “*the stories [are] the medicine*.”

While some focused their practice on addressing the specific challenges their communities face, others focused on celebrating the positive aspects of being Native, hoping their work would “*bring joy in*” to the community. Countering some outsiders’ tendency to engage in “*poverty porn*”—to over-emphasize challenges Native communities and other communities of color face for the purposes of generating sympathy for and attracting attention toward them, often in an exploitative manner⁴—one multidisciplinary performer commented, “*I know that our community still has a lot of problems, but we also have a lot of joy, we also had to have a lot of love and a lot of humor*.” This individual described a central message of their work to be “*okay, yeah, we didn’t have a lot of money, but we still had fun, you know, and we didn’t, you know, suddenly turn to drugs or whatever... So I think that’s what motivates me, is to make sure that whatever I do as a storyteller in whatever genre is that it lifts people up*.” Another multidisciplinary performer framed

4 For more on the concept of poverty porn, see, for example J. Marcus, 2016 and M. Kertman, n.d.

Ultimately, their intent is to inspire a collective sense of agency to create positive community change: *“That sense of catharsis and celebration inspires us and challenges us to figure out how to sustain that in our lives and adapt what we get from art...to our lives and...ultimately hopefully begin to change some things in this world that are within our power.”*

bringing community members together to witness their practice as creating space for community celebration. Ultimately, their intent is to inspire a collective sense of agency to create positive community change: *“That sense of catharsis and celebration inspires us and challenges us to figure out how to sustain that in our lives and adapt what we get from art...to our lives and...ultimately hopefully begin to change some things in this world that are within our power.”*

Creating to uplift and support other Native creators. Approximately one-fifth of interviewees described their practice as supporting not just the Native community writ large but their fellow Native creators more specifically.

This drive was particularly strong among older or more experienced creators who intentionally built into their practice room to support and uplift younger or more up-and-coming Native creators. They referred to their work in terms of *“mentorship”* or *“advocacy.”* Several such interviewees described the importance of offering younger creators support because the art world is *“not a meritocracy,”* making them feel compelled to help *“[make] sure that the folks who really should be part of shifting the dominant narrative are in spaces where they can do so and they’re both resourced and emotionally cared for.”* One established musician described the importance of creating opportunities for other Native individuals where possible *“whether they have experience or not, whether they have a degree or not”* because *“it’s important for them to get that experience and to be in the room to see oth-*



er Natives doing their thing at the highest level possible.” Interviewees maintained that such experiences will enable them to see their potential and develop the credentials needed to succeed in the Western art world. Even younger or less established interviewees felt a calling to support their peers. One described it as “band[ing] together and...creat[ing] opportunities for each other,” forming groups that provide mutual aid by sharing work opportunities, tips about furthering their practice, and general camaraderie and encouragement with one another.

Notably, interviewees also described ways in which uplifting and inspiring fellow creators strengthened their own work. Several described collaboration with other Native people as being imperative to producing high-quality work, particularly when the work addresses issues of Native culture and identity. Commenting on the value of having other Native artists’ input on such work, one interviewee reflected, “The more you have Native people around... they’ll call you out and be like, hey, that’s not accurate or that’s corny or that, you know, I’d be careful wearing that or doing that because it could be perceived in [a certain] way...and I think the more that companies do that, and the more that individuals do that, especially when they’re working on Native-based projects, then the better the outcome will be.”

How creators reach Native communities: Intentional content, collaborations, and means of sharing their work.

In order to ensure that their work that is meant to enrich Native communities actually does so, interviewees described being intentional about each step of the creative process. Specifically, the drive to reach Native communities shapes key decisions creators make about *the content* of their work, the *collaborations* they choose to seek out, and *where and with whom* they ultimately put their energies into sharing their creations.

Reaching Native communities through intentional content. Interviewees driven by the purpose of creating for Native communities discussed intentionally creating work that would be understood by and resonate with other Native individuals, with the full knowledge that non-Native audiences may not fully understand or connect with the content of the work. Multiple interviewees specifically mentioned this in the context of incorporating jokes or “insider knowledge” into their work that only other Native people would fully appreciate. This is not always an easy task. One playwright commented on having to push non-Native collaborators to ensure that such jokes *“that no one in the rehearsal room ever understands but that are for the Native people and the people of color”* make it into the final production: *“They always fight me, and I say don’t worry, trust me, it’ll work, and then we get to the house and they’re like, why are they all laughing at that? And I’m like...now I know exactly where all the Native people are sitting.”* Another playwright stressed the importance of giving Native people the chance to see themselves and their culture reflected in artistic works, commenting on the power of an analogous work: *“That moment in ‘Crazy Rich Asians’ where they played the mahjong game, and it’s never explained what they’re doing in the game, and they just play, but everyone who knows that culture knows exactly what was happening in the play of the game... It spoke to the people of that culture, and it made them so excited...I want to write to Native people [in that way], and if other people connect to that along the way, then you know, all the better.”* Another theater artist shared that *“whenever the audiences are predominately Native”* they aim for creating a *“cathartic experience”* in which Native audience members can *“identify and see their stories on stage”* to, as another interviewee put it, *“be able to see a different kind of future for themselves out of this experience and be able to heal.”*

Reaching Native communities through intentional collaboration. As explored earlier in this report, interviewees described finding opportunities to support and uplift fellow Native creators to be a powerful motivator for engaging in their work. One means of doing so is by strategically seeking out opportunities for collaboration with other Native creators. Interviewees shared that the most direct means of collaboration was through carving out paid work opportunities for fellow Native creators. A musician described intentionally ensuring *“every [music] video we’ve ever done, we have a Native director or Native producers or the on-set people are Native people.”* A playwright described writing Native characters into their works to *“fuel opportunity”* for Native actors.

Short of paid work, interviewees also looked for opportunities to use their own platform to give exposure to fellow creators. For example, an elder creator with a sizable following described putting together an online show in the early days of the pandemic. Each week the show featured different Native storytellers, with the purpose being to create an *“opportunity to be able to highlight more artists and to uplift more artists.”*

Finally, some interviewees described creating resources or making peers aware of existing resources that enable fellow creators to advance their own practices. A music-maker and producer described using some of the income generated through their music career to create and operate a music studio on their home reservation that is free and open for other Native musicians to use. This resource supports fellow creators in multiple ways, *“whether it be making the beat for them or mixing and mastering the song or recording them, teaching them about the equipment, teaching them about what I’ve learned from the business.”* Other interviewees echoed the desire to create this kind of space for fellow Native creators. One described their desire to create a physical space for Native creators to both make their own work and pass on their skills and knowledge to others, with the ultimate intent of *“helping other artists get access to the resources they need or find like-minded people with similar values and intentions for their art, and to really just connect the dots on those things.”* Another interviewee who described themselves as well versed in both Western and Native ways of working described doing *“a lot of code-switching”* for other Native creators *“to support*

them in their practice and kind of help navigate the access to resources and touring.”

Reaching Native communities through intentional sharing. Interviewees described multiple settings in which they proactively seek to share their work, knowing these settings have the greatest potential for reaching and enriching fellow Native people. These settings included educational institutions, community spaces, and remote or digital spaces.

First, many interviewees described feeling especially drawn to reaching Native youth. As one said, *“When it comes to the core group of what it is that I wanted to achieve with my work, it’s always back to the Native youth... it’s about hoping that the kids see themselves in something that you do, hoping that it inspires them.”* Interviewees saw youth outreach as a means of empowering not just young people but also Native communities at large: *“We’re helping to influence Native children about what their options are...in a way that will build capacity for the communities.”* To reach Native youth, approximately one-third of interviewees reported sharing their practice through single- or multi-session classes, workshops, or performances in school settings ranging from preschools to universities. This was especially true of interviewees who lived in regions with sizable Native populations, which tend to have *“a huge number of schools that are basically one hundred percent tribal members”* and in which they find that *“most of the administrators...really do like to connect the kids to their tribal heritage.”* Several interviewees noted that sharing their practice in schools, often via a regular *“circuit,”* enables them to serve the Native community and stitch together income: *“I don’t live near any urban setting where a person could make a living in the arts, you know...it’s not an option...so that’s why, you know, I just kind of got into the niche of...having audiences in schools, which is great.”* Interviewees also sought to share their practice in schools in which Native youth were in the minority. A dancer who regularly brings their practice to K-12 schools with small numbers of Native youth framed this work as an opportunity to help Native youth feel less marginalized and help build bridges between them and their non-Native peers: *“My goal...is really to look at how I felt when I was young, and all the racism and all the negativity and...traveling to the schools [we hope we are] helping these Native youth but also helping the non-Native youth get a better understanding, so they’re treating them right.”*

Interviewees saw youth outreach as a means of empowering not just young people but also Native communities at large: *“We’re helping to influence Native children about what their options are... in a way that will build capacity for the communities.”*

“These online platforms are appreciated by a lot of the elders and those that really don’t have the means to travel to these presentations, performances, powwow gatherings. So I think we found that [even after the pandemic] there will be a constant need for an online platform to provide outreach for our culture and for a means for a lot of people to share.”

Second, to reach broader audiences of Native youth and adults, approximately half of interviewees reported sharing their practice in community settings other than schools, both on and off tribal lands. These settings included sacred or ceremonial events, community festivals, seasonal and holiday celebrations, political events, public events focused on mental and behavioral health, community talking circles, and other public or informal community get-togethers. Some interviewees described sharing their work on tribal lands as being the best way to “reach our intended demographic” and “fulfilling my dream as a kid, which was walking around so many reservations and seeing the empty buildings they have and thinking, why aren’t we having shows in there, why aren’t we recording in here?” Several shared that their tribal council was pivotal in enabling such opportunities, with one interviewee commenting, “We have a lot of people in tribal council who’ve been cultural champions,” who have “provided me with a wealth of resources to be able to disseminate [artistic and cultural practices] into our communities.”

Those who worked in community settings away from tribal lands described it as “liberating” to know that they could serve Native people from anywhere through their work. One theater-maker described realizing that “I didn’t actually have to go home and work for the tribe to serve my people” because “there were things I could do for Native people with theater.” However, when working outside Native communities, they described needing to be thoughtful about how and where they choose to work to ensure they reach Native audiences. One interviewee described seeking guidance from local Native residents when setting up produc-

tions and performance-related events in unfamiliar areas, which helped them present their work in places that local Native residents considered appropriate within their community's context: *"I see my job as...putting on a play [at that location] because that's what the community wants, so that's the ideal place for that play."*

Finally, interviewees also described sharing their work with Native communities remotely, via Native-specific radio or television shows or digital communities on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified remote sharing of work; nearly every interviewee described shifting at least a portion of their practice to online platforms. Interviewees expressed a wide range of feelings about this shift, from its being *"incredibly stifling"* to *"really great because actually having to do audio plays and Zoom plays has really changed the way I think about other mediums and made me braver...it's opened up a lot of other avenues for creativity."* Yet most described feeling isolated from their respective communities of Native audiences and fellow creators. Seeing the hole that the pandemic created in opportunities for Native creators to share their practice at powwows and other in-person community events, one interviewee created a "Social Distance Powwow" Facebook group that currently has over a quarter of a million members. The group provides an outlet for community-based practitioners to share and witness the work of Native creators across North America. While not a replacement for in-person gatherings, interviewees described online platforms for sharing creators' practices as offering certain advantages. One highlighted the fact that *"it provides a place...for us to get more in-depth about our culture in our songs, dances, and our art. Whereas when you're at a show or event or powwow gathering you don't have that highlighted aspect of it, everybody's...just kind of sharing doing their own thing, but an online platform, it's like, when you're on a screen by yourself you have...the spotlight, so we have learned and we've gone more in-depth in terms of education and collaboration."* Another advantage is the democratizing nature of the Internet—provided there is access to a reliable connection—and its ability to reach individuals far and wide: *"These online platforms are appreciated by a lot of the elders and those that really don't have the means to travel to these presentations, performances, powwow gatherings. So I think we found that [even after the pandemic] there will be a constant need for an online platform to provide outreach for our culture and for a means for a lot of people to share."*

“Deflecting light into dark places”: Creating for non-Native communities

Why Native creators engage: To make work that educates and builds bridges with non-Native communities. Half of the interviewees described engaging in performance-based practices meant to be shared with “non-Native,” “mixed,” or “global” audiences. Interviewees stressed the importance of doing so thoughtfully since, given the sacred nature of some performance-based practices within Native communities, “not all knowledge should be shared outside the community.” However, “when it’s appropriate, when the community is okay with sharing certain knowledge,” interviewees described the drive to reach broad audiences as being rooted in a desire to not just entertain others, but also to educate them about what it means to be Native—“the people, the land, the culture.” Creators worked toward these educational goals by intentionally creating works “meant for non-Natives who wanted to learn more about” these aspects of Native life. Creating these works and making an effort to share them with non-Native audiences provides a platform to “introduce people to our ideas,” “bring understanding of who we are, and show us in a different light,” all of which will ideally build bridges to “broaden the horizons of many people who don’t really know what [being Native] is all about.”

Interviewees described three specific impacts they hope to make as a result of their bridge-building efforts. These include challenging racism against and stereotypes of Native people, increasing Native representation in Western-dominant culture, and connecting people and imparting empathy on the most fundamental, human level.

Challenging misperceptions, stereotypes, and racism against Native people. Facing persistent stigmas, stereotypes, and racism both in the U.S. performing arts sector and in everyday life was a frequent challenge that interviewees discussed. For the one-third of interviewees who “see a lot of [racism and stereotyping] still going on, where Natives are looked down on and looked at as less than,” the motivation to educate non-Western audiences was tied to a desire to challenge the status quo and shift longstanding narratives about Native people and history that pervade Western culture. Within the U.S. performing arts sector in particular, interviewees described a persistent “colonial mindset” as sometimes shaping both how Native creators are treated by audiences and presenting organizations—with “a lot of animosity”—and what cre-

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ative practices are considered worthy of audience attention, with *“the tourist industry starting to dictate what is being performed”* rather than the creators themselves.

In light of these challenges, interviewees described creating *“for a wide audience, because that’s where change needs to happen,”* viewing their work not just in terms of *“education”* but also *“advocacy”* and anchoring it in the idea that *“education will be a good way to advocate”* for the value of Native people and cultures. Interviewees saw their practice as a direct and effective platform for engaging in such education and advocacy. For example, a playwright who grew up doing advocacy-based outreach to non-Natives commented, *“Once I found out that I could be a part of something like the contemporary Native theater movement it felt very liberating to know that like, everything I loved about theater and everything I loved about [advocacy] and changing people’s minds about, you know, how they see Native people could all come together in that space.”* In bringing their work to schools with non-Native students who live in the vicinity of tribal lands, a musician and educator has found that *“if you have place-based learning where all students, not just Native students, are learning about the culture from that area everybody gets a little more buy-in, you start...lowering, limiting the number of racial disagreements.”* When performing for non-Native audiences who *“still [think] I live in a teepee and things like that,”* a self-described storyteller, dancer, and educator stated, *“When we come in our big goal is to tell our stories through dance, but also to show the beauty of our culture,”* in the hope that audiences *“can gain an appreciation for not only the dance and what we do, but also learn something about the culture, learn something about the*

“Once I found out that I could be a part of something like the contemporary Native theater movement it felt very liberating to know that like, everything I loved about theater and everything I loved about [advocacy] and changing people’s minds about, you know, how they see Native people could all come together in that space.”

people, and I think it kind of shifts people’s understanding of who we are. Like, we are really regular people.”

Some of the interviewees who described themselves as being connected to their tribe explained that their drive to use their work to counteract racism and stereotypes is rooted in the culture and value systems of their tribe. A theater-maker whose tribe operates a history and culture museum aimed at non-Native tourists, which was *“founded on the idea it’s hard to hate someone you know a lot about,”* described being brought up with *“the idea that it was our responsibility to be educating people about our culture and sharing our stories.”* They see an opportunity to continue that work today through their practice as a playwright and director. Another creator connected their motivation to tell stories of historical injustices against Natives through their work with the core values of their tribes, stating that the drive *“very much comes from...Laguna Pueblo and Cherokee [values] that are very much about...constantly push[ing] back on the bullshit [Western] narrative, frankly.”* Ultimately, the hoped-for result in enacting these cultural values through their artistic practice is to *“build a better knowledge base about our people”* to increase *“equality across different cultures.”*

Increasing Native representation in Western-dominant culture.

One-third of interviewees described one of the main drivers of their work as *“promot[ing] the Indigenous perspective in the arts,”* thereby increasing the visibility of Native people and voices in the United States writ large. Noting *“a lack of Native presence in all of these different genres and industries”* at present, interviewees characterized sharing their work with broad audiences as a means to *“open doors”* or *“break barriers”* in their respective creative fields, thus making strides toward increasing the visibility of Native perspectives and creating more opportunities for future generations of Native creators.

Interviewees viewed sharing their work with broad audiences to be in service of pushing up against existing systems that keep Native perspectives from being more widely visible and accessible. A musician who has had some commercial success—which they interpreted as their work having *“proven to be good enough in the white world”*—commented, *“My goal nowadays is to try to get one of our songs in a TV show and/or into a movie”* because they see Native representation as sorely *“lacking”* in those indus-



tries. Several interviewees described the importance of trailblazing on this front. One theater-maker noted preferring to present their work in and for Native communities, but consciously choosing to put equal effort into presenting their work at major Western venues “to break doors down” and hopefully lower barriers for other Native creators: *“When I break the door down I’m not gonna stand there and rebuild it, I’m going to keep it open.”* Another creator described choosing to present work at a white-dominant theater “[not] because I needed approval...[but] because I would have been the first Indian to ever do this.” Similarly, another theater-maker described feeling driven to pursue a commission for a Broadway production because *“there’s never been a Native American playwright on Broadway in the history of American theater and that’s important that that happens...for me, obviously, in my career, but it’s also important for the field.”* Such “firsts” are ultimately viewed as important steps in expanding the Western canon: *“How [Western institutions] think about Native work is like, ‘Oh, it doesn’t exist! And so I get like a great sense of satisfaction every time I finish [a new work] because I’m just like, there’s no one [Native] in the canon...what’s your excuse [now]?”*

“Why do I make theater as a Native person? I truly, deeply believe that this is the most powerful work to change the narrative of Native people, because we need to see ourselves reflected back in stories, because that is the most powerful way people on the planet these days learn how to be human.”

Interviewees also expressed hope that achieving greater representation will ultimately result in more Native role models for future generations. A musician commented, *“Growing up, I missed that. I had these dreams of being a Native pop superstar and there just was no one, you know, there was really...no one on that spectrum...I had to really create it.”* An actor and playwright commented, *“It’s so important that people see representation of who they are on stage and film because growing up, the only person I saw on film was [Native actor] Wes Studi...I just think it’s so wonderful for kids to see more people on stage that look like them.”* One playwright, actor, and filmmaker described this to be the crux of why they create, commenting on the uniquely powerful role that the arts and culture can play in offering guidance for navigating life as a modern Native person: *“Why do I make theater as a Native person? I truly, deeply believe that this is the most powerful work to change the narrative of Native people, because we need to see ourselves reflected back in stories, because that is the most powerful way people on the planet these days learn how to be human.”*

While recognizing that significant hurdles have yet to be overcome on the path toward greater representation, several interviewees expressed a sense that the present moment is ripe for the centering of Native perspectives—as well as those of other people of color—in broader U.S. culture. Interviewees described a sense of growing receptivity to different perspectives on the part of white-dominant audiences: *“Right now, the shows that we’re seeing that are taking off*

are...definitely not written to the mass American audience...I find that to be a sort of a new thing in American media and it's very exciting to me."

Connecting people and imparting empathy. Approximately a quarter of interviewees described creating their work with an intent to connect people and *"impart empathy"* on the most fundamental, human level. Beyond changing narratives or perceptions about Native people in particular, creators framed this drive as transcending race, ethnicity, and other characteristics entirely. One actor shared that when engaging in their craft, *"I try not to think of a race that's watching, I try to get the human."* These creators expressed a desire to *"bring people together"* by being *"intentional about what we share, the stories that we share,"* which contain the message that *"we all have that responsibility to be kind to one another, to uplift one another, regardless of tribe, regardless of race, regardless of religious belief."*

Interviewees described feeling doubly qualified to impart these messages as Native people and as creators, enabling them to play the unique role of *"international goodwill ambassador."* As Native people, several interviewees shared that creating with this intention is rooted in Indigenous cultural values and worldviews. One interviewee who explained that *"empathy is the essence of spirituality in Blackfeet culture"* connected this to creating and sharing music in order *"to be a conduit, a channel, an irrigation canal, the wiring to connect people with stories, that hopefully connects them with empathy."* An actor and playwright described how their work is grounded in *"Native knowledge"* about the interconnectedness of all living beings on Earth, and that their storytelling is a means of *"sharing that worldview so that people gain an understanding...that we're all related."*

As creators, interviewees described performance-based forms as *"the perfect means"* of fostering empathy and understanding. One dancer, musician, and culture-bearer found that *"no matter where [in the world] we're talking about...[these art forms] have international, universal validity."* After touring the world educating audiences about their practice, one concluded that a unique power of performance-based practices is that they *"tend to obliterate any kind of boundaries of time or space or place"* so that *"no matter where you go, you know people everywhere can relate."* A musician and storyteller gave an analogy that illustrates the role



that creators can play in illuminating human truths and drawing people together: *“One of the things artists are responsible for doing is to clear a pathway. You’ve had a mirror out in the sunshine, right? The mirror reflects that sunlight. If you work that mirror, you can find a hole, a little place that’s dark, and you can deflect light into that dark place. That’s what an artist does.”*

How creators reach broad audiences: Intentional content and means of sharing their work.

When positioning themselves and their work as building bridges to non-Native communities, interviewees described being intentional about *the content* of the work they share and *where and with whom* they share the work.

Reaching non-Native audiences through intentional content.

When creating work for *“bringing the culture to non-Native people,”* interviewees described shaping the content of their work with those people in mind. An actor and screenwriter commented that a particular piece they created *“was meant for non-Natives who wanted to learn more about Natives,”* while a playwright discussed a specific play as being more specifically *“written to and for white people.”* A playwright, composer, and lyricist described creating musicals that bring attention to historical injustices Native people have experienced in hopes *“of re-storying...the dominant American narrative for non-Indigenous audiences.”*

While some interviewees described the fact that *“a lot of my career is written at, to, and for white people”* in positive terms because of the educational and bridge-building intent of the work, others felt that this was not necessarily their ideal but instead reflective of *“the reality [that] for like, typical theater, the audiences are predominantly white.”* This imperative to *“appease the white people”* could be mentally and emotionally taxing for creators given that *“if you’re not around people that understand [where you’re coming from as a Native person], you kind of feel like you’re almost tokenizing yourself.”*

Despite such challenges, some said that as they directed their work toward and engaged with non-Native audiences repeatedly, the tenor of the engagement can change, moving past basic education and into a deeper level of dialogue and cultural understanding. One self-described tribal member and cultural ambassador who engages in dance-based storytelling comment-

“One of the things artists are responsible for doing is to clear a pathway. You’ve had a mirror out in the sunshine, right? The mirror reflects that sunlight. If you work that mirror, you can find a hole, a little place that’s dark, and you can deflect light into that dark place. That’s what an artist does.”

ed on how reactions to their work among non-Native audiences, presenting partners, and funders have gradually shifted: *“For a while...it was kind of like, [non-Natives] would draw a box and I stepped into the box...But then, over time...I get to draw a box and then they step into the box that I draw and I let them see it and the conversation is changed. Yeah, we’re still showcasing the dancing but...there’s more of a conversation about it now, it’s more of an intimate level of knowledge-sharing in the kind of conversations that we have and I’m thankful for that, I’m thankful for how things have evolved.”*

Reaching non-Native audiences through intentional sharing.

When trying to reach beyond Native communities, interviewees explained the need to be strategic about the venues in which they present their work, given that audience composition is largely *“depend[ent] on the setting.”* To serve broad educational purposes, interviewees prefer venues where non-Native audiences are likely to come into contact with the work and ideally where creators and audiences can engage substantively. Interviewees noted that forging partnerships with such spaces can have challenges because they may be *“operating with so many American rules and regulations”* that can *“clash very hard with Indigenous ways of representation and ownership.”* Yet, they said developing relationships with presenting spaces was the best way to bridge these divides.

Interviewees first and foremost described presenting work in person at “mainstream” performance venues such as theaters and concert halls. These ranged from small community venues to nationally recognized, large-capacity venues, including the Kennedy Center, the Lincoln Center, and Broadway. Regarding the latter type, one theater-maker reported strategically partnering with such venues because they draw *“thousands and thousands of people that would never come to one of my plays in a regional theater or would never come to my community productions...it’s an audience that I can’t reach any other way.”*

Given the educational aims of their work, creators also shared that presenting at educational institutions, from K-12 schools to colleges and universities, was also a primary means of reaching broad audiences. Some described holding regular appointments at educational institutions while others would go on “tours” of schools or present at one-off classes or workshops.

Finally, interviewees described presenting work at community spaces such as festival grounds, state fairs, local and national parks, libraries, community centers, restaurants/bars, and private gatherings such as conferences and parties. Interviewees cited festivals in particular as a major opportunity to share performance-based work with broad, international audiences and described a significant appetite globally for their work: *“I’ve gotten bigger responses over there [in other countries] than I have here...they seem to be more grateful to see what it is that I do and where it comes from...every time I step on the stage I always wear my tribal colors at some point in the concert...so that brings back, you know, who I am and my culture... that went over really well where audiences are eager to see a Native performer that wasn’t playing drums or a flute...like it’s something that they’ve never seen before.”*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUNDERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Native creators have multifaceted reasons for engaging in their work, and these reasons shape their decisions about how, where, and with whom to create and share. Having such a broad range of means and ends can pose challenges for creators when seeking resources to support their practices. Interviewees commented, “Framing the work in a way that both feels like it has integrity to [Native creators and audiences] and communicates in such a way that can be understood by non-Indigenous folks” is “really hard work,” especially when they try to articulate to potential funders or presenting partners the reasons for, and value behind, the creative decisions they make. The challenge for the U.S. performing arts sector—funders and presenting partners in particular—is to recognize these decisions as being both deliberate and effective for reaching creators’ intended audiences and achieving their intended impacts on those audiences. This is perhaps especially true for work aimed toward and presented within Native communities, which can play crucial roles within these communities but often be invisible to or not well understood by those outside them.

- How can funders and presenters become more aware of and better support Native creators’ efforts to care for themselves and their communities through their performance-based practices?
- How can funders and presenting spaces be better partners and bridge-builders in Native creators’ efforts to connect with broad audiences?





3

Toward cultural equity:
What resources and systemic
changes do Native creators identify
as high-priority needs?



3

Toward cultural equity: What resources and systemic changes do Native creators identify as high-priority needs?

Both the nature of Native creators' performance-based practices, and their reasons for engaging in their practices, are multidimensional. Their practices can sometimes defy clear-cut categorization within the taxonomy of Western performing arts forms, and are often best described using the creators' own words. Their varied motivations for engaging in their practices sometimes require them to switch between modes of expression and spaces for audience engagement to alternately "get the nod of *understanding from the Native audience*" and have "*broad appeal*."

Because their ways of self-identifying, working, and sharing often go against the grain of norms or expectations within the U.S. performing arts sector, the opportunities and resources in place within this sector are not always structured to support Native creators. Describing the lack of cultural equity within current systems for funding and presenting performance-based work, an elder storyteller and theater-maker commented, "*One of the arrogant white privilege things I've heard is...there's a belief that we all share the same resources. And that we all have [access to] the same resources...it's not true. Our people are still getting piecemeal...that's the reality of it.*"

Creators thus articulated a desire for more support in navigating existing opportunities to create or share their work, as well as a desire for current opportunities and resources to be restructured based on a more nuanced understanding of the array of intents and communities for their creative work. To interviewees, such changes would result in greater cultural equity for Native creators, enabling them to “reclaim our sovereignty”—the freedom to engage in their practice when, where, and how they believe would best realize their creative visions.

The remainder of this report describes interviewees’ perspectives on changes that could be made to ways in which funders and presenting partners engage with and seek to support Native creators. These changes fell into three broad categories: changes aimed at increasing Native creators’ access to current resources and opportunities within the U.S. performing arts environment; changes aimed at increasing the extent to which Native creators are valued within this environment; and changes aimed at reforming how performing arts funders and presenting organizations work with Native creators in order to build better, more mutually enriching partnerships.

Increasing access

Native creators desire more opportunities to thrive within the current U.S. performing arts environment. Because current means of funding and presenting performance-based work are largely structured to support creators and creative forms that align with Western traditions and values, interviewees described the current U.S. performing arts environment as being “very closed” and “secret to us but open to the people in it.” They recounted frustrations of working within environments that prioritize and reward creators who already have visibility, networks, and relationships with gatekeepers and who can readily frame their work in terms recognizable to those who hold power.

Yet interviewees recognized the necessity of working within this environment, and pinpointed several changes that could make it more

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open to them. These changes, explored in-depth below, included affording Native creators greater visibility and access to gatekeepers, more tailored supports to navigate the current performing arts environment, and more opportunities for professional development and growth within this environment. Each would enable Native creators to make better use of existing opportunities that may be currently inaccessible to or underutilized by themselves and their peers.

CONSIDERATIONS

Increase creators’ visibility and access to knowledge and gatekeepers. While Native creators are keenly aware that *“the most important thing as an independent artist is building relationships, forming relationships, building bridges, building collaborations,”* about a quarter of interviewees expressed a specific need for more such connections with gatekeepers within the current arts and culture sector—specifically funders and presenting partners—and the knowledge and opportunities they can help unlock. While eager to create and theoretically aware that opportunities exist for creators like themselves, interviewees described struggling to find and secure such opportunities. One commented, *“There’s all kinds of programs and grants that are around, but...[for Native creators] I don’t think there’s a lot of visibility on what the pathways are.”* This results in an arts landscape where *“there’s a lot of people to support and love on who are not getting any support or love for their practice.”* Several interviewees who pursue their practice professionally felt that they possess the talent and tenacity needed to share their practice on a global stage, and that the missing puzzle piece is simply more opportunities to connect with those who hold power and sway: as one music-based creator put it, *“We know how. We just need a chance.”*

Increase access to administrative supports that help creators navigate and promote their practice. Alongside greater access to knowledge and gatekeepers, some interviewees also expressed a need for administrative support to spread awareness of their practice and tap into existing resources. Interviewees shared that while some more established creators may be able to hire teams to help ease administrative burdens, many *“can’t afford to hire anybody else”* to support their practice. Without assistance from a team, individuals described being a performance-based creator as being akin to *“entrepreneurship,”* where one person is responsible

for filling the roles of *“businessperson, marketer, dramaturgy person, contracts person, and manager.”* This could be especially daunting given that positioning oneself within current systems inevitably varies depending on factors such as the intended audience, venue, collaborators, and types of funding needed for each performance-based engagement. Noting that *“you have to package yourself differently [in different contexts] and I think that that’s something that is really hard,”* several interviewees described the need for guidance from an agent or manager, as well as a social media manager. All of them could help creators *“package and present”* themselves appropriately within the current performing arts environment.

The question of how best to package oneself is especially critical when seeking funding, and for this reason, interviewees repeatedly expressed a particular desire to work with professional grant-writers. Regardless of whether they pursued their practice as the primary way to make a living, many interviewees described grant-writing as a necessary part of the creative process that involves considerable labor, exposition, and reinvention. While a few interviewees described having the resources to hire an in-house grant-writer or hold jobs in nonprofit grant-writing, which helps expose them to the skills needed to support their own practice, most desired more support with grant-writing to help them with *“certain things like how to package yourself in such a way and talk about your work in either one way or another way to...conform to the culture of that grant.”* Creators also described a need for access to *“lawyers [to help with] trademark and licensing and copywriting,”* essential means of protecting their work.

Increase creators’ access to opportunities for professional development and self-investment. In addition to desiring better access to external supports from gatekeepers and administrative teams, more than half of the interviewees also expressed a desire to build their own capacities and invest in themselves and their practice—a crucial component of creative sovereignty. As things currently stand, the costs of professional development trainings and tools can prohibit creators from deepening their skills and evolving their practices; in the words of one actor, *“it takes a lot of money to invest in an acting career.”*

To *“get on as many other radars as possible,”* some individuals expressed a desire to improve their self-marketing and entrepreneurship skills through *“marketing classes”* or *“marketing certificates”* and web design training, all of which would help *“to give people an access*

point” to their work. Acknowledging the reality that coming up with funds to cover the costs of a grant-writer for nonguaranteed funding is not a feasible option for many creators, interviewees also expressed a desire for grant-writing training. Finally, interviewees described the need for practice-specific training and tools; for example, one self-described actor and storyteller described a need for funds to support “on-camera classes, audition classes, and casting director workshops, and how to book gigs” as well as equipment and supplies such as “computers and cameras for editing reels.”

Reconsidering value

Native creators articulated a need for placing higher value on their ways of training, working, and sharing their work. Interviewees described the deep respect that Native communities hold for performance-based creators and the high degree to which their practices are valued given their communities’ understanding of *“the many ways in which [these practices] can benefit us as Indigenous peoples.”* They expressed a desire for this same degree of respect and value to be held by those within the broader U.S. performing arts sector, and called for Western presenting organizations, funders, and audiences to be mindful of the ways in which their own backgrounds and knowledge bases have shaped their value systems. At present, the fact that *“most [funding and presenting] organizations are still far away from really having a true understanding about our culture”* creates an environment in which many Native creators’ work *“is not valued by the dominant culture around our country.”* Several interviewees commented that they felt their work only became valued by funders, presenting organizations, and/or audiences once they became associated with educational institutions, funders, or venues that are highly regarded within *“the matrix of worth in America...like, once you [become associated with] those types of places it’s like, ‘Wow, that person must be good.’”*

Interviewees are eager for those in power to place a higher value on their practices. In their view, this could occur through those in the performing arts sector developing a deeper understanding of and appreciation for key facets of their practice: their backgrounds and training, and their ways of working and sharing their work. Each of these is explored further below.

With such examples, interviewees described a need for family- and community-based training to be seen as equally valuable as training that happens in Western educational settings, with equal levels of respect garnered from being “born into the family tradition of singing” and from training at a “*really prestigious institution.*”

CONSIDERATIONS

Expand the kinds of backgrounds and training that are valued and viewed as worthy of support. In learning and developing their practice, interviewees described relying on a range of forms of training, whether from elders, family members, other Native community members, or tribal or Western educational institutions. Many described acquiring their skills and cultivating their practice in multiple ways.

Yet about one-quarter of interviewees described a hierarchy of value in which those with degrees from Western educational institutions attracted more attention from prominent funders and presenting organizations. Even among creators who obtain such degrees, interviewees described a hierarchy of respect with those affiliated with Ivy League institutions garnering the most respect. As one interviewee commented, though “*the expertise [may be] in there*” from the start, it may not be fully seen or appreciated by outsiders “*if you don’t have the [right] credentials.*” Some interviewees described feeling grateful for the learning opportunities that can come along on the path to earning such credentials. However, others described a number of skills and forms of knowledge as being best learned within or alongside community. For example, one dance-based creator who maintains their own studio and tours the world with their dancing attributed this success to the mastery of those who trained them—the elders in their tribal community—and to their career-long practice of forging “*deep relationships*” and “*partnerships*” with other creators in their community.

With such examples, interviewees described a need for family- and community-based training to be seen as equally valuable as training that happens in Western educational settings, with equal levels of respect garnered from being *“born into the family tradition of singing”* and from training at a *“really prestigious institution.”* Citing the need for this change, one elder storyteller and theater-maker commented, *“What needs to happen [to change current value systems] is that we need to not focus on ‘achieving professionalism,’ but instead achieving, if you will, a master of their arts...where whoever [practices their chosen forms] after so many years, they’re considered a master guard for their art. That way [of recognizing and valuing talent] doesn’t come from the whites, it comes from us.”*

Expand the means of creating and sharing that are valued and viewed as worthy of support. Interviewees also specifically called for expanding the means of creating and sharing that are respected and viewed as worthy of support. Some shared the frustration of being told by non-Natives that their work *“doesn’t make sense,”* despite the fact that it *“makes sense to...my audience.”* Interviewees thus called for non-Native collaborators and funders to consciously increase the trust they place in Native creators’ ability to determine which types of artistic outputs and venues for presenting work will be most valuable for their intended audiences. Crucially, this re-valuing needs to extend not just to the artistic creations themselves, but also the ways of and timelines for working on those creations because *“valuing the Indigenous worldview...is valuing process.”*

About a quarter of interviewees called for a particular need to elevate the perceived value of community-engaged practices—that is, creative processes and works that involve direct interaction and engagement with Native communities and audiences. One interviewee commented that while Native creators themselves see *“no distinction between [their Western] theater work and [Native] community work,”* the *“only difference”* they could detect was the levels of respect and attention paid to each body of work by Western funders, presenters, and audiences. As the performing arts sector is currently structured, *“the further you get from your [Native] community, the more rewarded you are for it.”* Yet describing the power of community-engaged work, one creator commented: *“Someone who grew up going to the Lincoln Center or the Kennedy Center seeing ballets or orchestras, they consider*

that art, high art, or art of value. Whereas somebody else who didn't grow up with that experience, but remembers having their world rocked when they saw some spoken word poet drop some knowledge in their high school gym, they're going to say, 'I felt empowered there, I want to find the people who actually go to the communities and do the work.'" One interviewee shared the need to re-imagine a value system that accounts for this power, stating, "I feel like the next phase...is to get like funders and presenters to come up with a different measure of value [which acknowledges that] you might not be selling out a stadium, but that doesn't mean you're not having an impact." This new measure of value would be determined not just by audience size or venue, but by impact and the potential to "change a life."

See Native creators as authentically "valued," not just "valuable."

When discussing the need to increase the extent to which Native creators are valued within the performing arts sector, interviewees made a crucial distinction between authentically valuing Native creators and merely viewing them as valuable due to their Native identity, which can be "tokenizing." In reflecting on the events of 2020—both the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial unrest sparked by the murder of George Floyd—several interviewees reported that one welcome change was that many presenting and funding organizations began "making statements" regarding commitments to racial and cultural equity, and suggested increased "receptiveness" to creators from diverse backgrounds. While heartened by this change, interviewees expressed concern that some organizations may only attempt to engage with them in a transactional manner as a token display of support for nonwhite creators. They expressed hope that they will not be engaged merely to "check a box" for funding and presenting organizations, but rather that these organizations would approach partnerships from a place of genuinely valuing Native creators for their unique perspectives, work, and abilities to impact audiences and communities.

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Building better partnerships

Native creators called for reforms to the ways presenting organizations and other collaborators partner with them.

Interviewees shared that the undervaluation and dearth of respect some Native creators experience can negatively impact their working partnerships with non-Native presenters and other creative collaborators.

One commented, *"I find a lot of times in rooms I'm having to remind people that like yes, you treat me different than you treat [my collaborator]. Note that."* Interviewees shared that such dynamics between themselves and their non-Native collaborators can create an acute feeling of isolation since that they are typically *"the only Native person"* working on a given performance-based collaboration. Some interviewees described a sense of resignation among Native creators, commenting that *"there's a sense we're going to have to code-switch in colonial spaces forever"* and that in the face of such difficulties, some creators can develop a preference to only work with other Native collaborators and presenting organizations because *"it's just so much easier...it's so much more free."* However, interviewees acknowledged the limited opportunities for engaging solely with other Native creators and organizations in the current performing arts landscape and the limited audiences that doing so would reach.

Interviewees described three incremental improvements that presenting organizations and other collaborators could make to their partnership practices to cultivate more synergistic working relationships. These recommended reforms, explored in-depth below, include granting Native creators greater creative license, developing more favorable partnership terms, and as taking new approaches to audience engagement. Each of these recommended reforms revolves around their creative partners becoming more open to and trusting of Native ways of knowing, working, and sharing.

CONSIDERATIONS

Enable Native creators to have more creative license. Interviewees expressed that one way to make meaningful reforms to partnership structures is to enable Native creators to exert more control over their work, with partners putting trust in their creative decision-making. While an interdisciplinary performer stated plainly that *"artists should be calling the shots"* when it comes to the content of their work, several interviewees discussed instances in which the content of their work was questioned by presenting partners out of concern that it might not resonate with non-Native audiences. In one case, a self-described theater artist explained receiving criticism of *"jokes that no one in the rehearsal room ever understands,"* although the jokes are intentionally written for *"Native people and the people of color."* Another described being wary of non-Native artistic directors who would *"give a shit ton of notes, because they*

“so far they haven’t said anything to me about the content that I made...I appreciate that and I wish that more [Native] artists got that opportunity to just let their art breathe like that and stop with the regulation...[Collaborators’ goal should be] supporting and... making that platform inclusive and not exclusive.”

don’t understand what Native storytelling is.” Similarly, a sound artist described how “I’ve had people on [my current project] tell me that certain concepts rub them the wrong way because maybe they didn’t understand it or what it meant.”

The sound artist contrasted this negative experience with another project in which their partner organization *“took a chance with me...so far they haven’t said anything to me about the content that I made...I appreciate that and I wish that more [Native] artists got that opportunity to just let their art breathe like that and stop with the regulation...[Collaborators’ goal should be] supporting and... making that platform inclusive and not exclusive.”* Similarly, a playwright explained that finding a presenting partner who trusted them to move forward with jokes that they didn’t understand, knowing that the work was written for *“specific [Native] communities,”* has been *“really freeing and exciting.”* In describing the conditions of *“the very best projects I’ve worked on,”* a costume designer commented that the common element has been an environment in which presenting partners have *“been very much like, ‘Okay we’ve assembled our team of Native theater artists and we’re going to let them do their thing because we completely trust them as like, adults and professionals, and we are not going to micromanage and try to completely control the end product.’”* While these types of partnerships have primarily been built with smaller, regional theaters, the interviewee commented that *“That should be...the model that larger, better-funded theaters should take note of”* and adopt.



Interviewees also requested that collaborators have more openness toward the temporal aspects of art-making and sharing. Describing the ways that creative and cultural expression as Native people can be distinct from the processes and outputs of Western artists, one interviewee explained, *“There’s an Indigenous sense of time,”* which can affect the time it takes to create works, share works, and even the pace at which a creator feels accustomed to moving through the world. Interviewees shared that increasing partners’ openness in this regard would honor the importance that Native creators place on process, which to one interviewee *“is part of the product and makes the product richer, more sustainable, and deeper.”*

Rethink standard terms for collaboration. Another way to reform standard modes of collaboration is to change the formal conditions—such as contract terms and budget requirements—upon which partnerships between Native creators and presenting organizations are built. While interviewees shared that partnership terms they have been presented with in the past have been disadvantageous or inequitable for themselves and other creators, interviewees expressed hesitance to push back on them out of concern that they would miss out on opportunities to advance their practice.

One theater-maker, in particular, has been able to develop a model for more equitable partnerships. Describing prior frustrations with being the only Native person working on a production, they forged a collaboration with a theater that gave them the creative leeway and budget flexibility to bring Native *“people in the room to represent themselves”* during the process of producing a recent play. For this production, the theater-maker was able to negotiate the hiring of Native individuals to fill a broad spectrum of roles on the production, including actors, visual artists, producers, and even caterers. Feeling how this enriched both the creative process and the final product, from that point onward the creator formalized similar expectations for future partnerships with presenting organizations, setting up their contracts so that *“I couldn’t be the only Indigenous art in the season and I couldn’t be the only Indigenous person paid.”* They also shared their contract language with other Native creators to give them a template for replicating this model.

Discussing broader changes to partnership structures that have helped create more equitable terms for collaboration, another interviewee involved in theater heralded the recent measures the Actors’ Equity Association has taken to lower barriers that had prevented many from joining the actors’ union.¹ They described this as an important step in ensuring fair and equitable working relationships between creators and theaters. In the words of the interviewee, this measure is a move in the right direction toward creating an environment in which *“if the place you’re working wants to be called professional, they have to have equity contracts, which are phenomenal.”*

1 For more information, see J. Raymond Pierce and R. Weinert-Kendt, 2021.

One musician explained that when sharing their work at performance venues, their audiences tend to be “*rich people*” as opposed to their intended audience of “*cultural people*.” The creator attributed this to a combination of ticket prices set by the venues, the locations of the venues, and a sense of exclusivity that the venues either purposefully cultivate or unknowingly exude.

Expand approaches to audience engagement. Finally, interviewees expressed a desire to change presenting partners’ approaches to attracting audiences—specifically, a greater emphasis on attracting more diverse audiences, including but not limited to more Native people. This stemmed from interviewees’ past frustrations in creating work for people who ultimately were not able to access it. One musician explained that when sharing their work at performance venues, their audiences tend to be “*rich people*” as opposed to their intended audience of “*cultural people*.” The creator attributed this to a combination of ticket prices set by the venues, the locations of the venues, and a sense of exclusivity that the venues either purposefully cultivate or unknowingly exude.

To address such issues, an interdisciplinary artist described enacting a policy for their performances to “*keep seats open so that if someone can’t get in [due to ticket availability or costs] they can [have a means to] access it.*” To make such practices sustainable, other interviewees suggested that presenting organizations or their underwriters develop a standard policy of “*buy[ing] back a block of tickets and mak[ing] them actually affordable for the intended audience.*” However, interviewees stressed that expanding audience engagement cannot just be about “*figuring out how to get more people of color into a theater*”; it also must be about finding ways to meaningfully engage with these audiences. For some creators, this necessitates “*the artists being in community, developing work with the community.*” One theater-maker described negotiating an audience engagement

stipulation with the presenting organizations they work with. This stipulation specifies that the creator will not agree to the partnership *“unless there’s some kind of engagement with local Indigenous folks”* over the course of creating and presenting the work. This policy enables the audience to be more *“balanced”* and ensures that community members are not excluded due to financial constraints, while also creating a sense of personal investment among them.

Native creators called for reforms to the nature and structure of funding made available to them.

While expressing gratitude for the funding opportunities that have come their way in the past, interviewees also shared several ways in which funding opportunities as they are currently structured pose difficulties for Native creators. Interviewees described having been *“conditioned into this scarcity economics”* in which *“[funders] make us feel like there’s a huge scarcity in terms of funding”* for which they are eligible, making the chances of receiving funding seem slim. Interviewees shared that this scarcity mindset, combined with feeling that funders do not always see, value, or understand their work, can discourage them and other Native creators they know from pursuing funding opportunities that are available to them.

Interviewees described six reforms that funders could make to better position Native creators to successfully pursue funding opportunities. Some of these reforms relate to funding processes, including applying for funding opportunities, reviewing applications, and reporting on the outcomes of funded projects, each of which could be made more culturally responsive. Others relate to the nature and types of work funders are willing to support, and the amount of autonomy creators are afforded. Just as with recommended reforms that presenting partners could make, all six of these reforms aim to increase performing arts funders’ openness to Native ways of knowing, working, and sharing.

CONSIDERATIONS

Streamline funding applications and eligibility criteria. As previously described, many interviewees expressed a desire for administrative support and grant-writing training, due in part to the fact that seeking and applying for funding are both time-consuming and highly specialized skillsets. However, instead of placing the onus on creators to get more outside help to meet these challeng-

es, there is an opportunity for funders to change how application processes work.

Currently, *“there’s stuff that’s really hard to figure out”* about locating and applying for funding opportunities. With regard to application processes, one interviewee noted, *“I see that a lot of these places that give money are just like, ‘Come up with your budget.’ But not every artist knows how to put together a budget.”* They commented that within current systems, *“there’s not enough guidance and support on that, or on documentation [of how funds were used].”* While they understand that funders are hesitant to provide extensive budgeting assistance *“because of legalities,”* they would appreciate somewhat more guidance: *“Just say like, hey, save 12 percent [at minimum for taxes], and... make sure you put in some like some self care in your budget, or make sure you put in some marketing, make sure you put in some promotion and travel.”*

Interviewees also expressed the desire for less burdensome means of determining eligibility and locating opportunities for funding. Some described how useful it would be for funders to introduce filter systems to enable creators to more easily locate funding opportunities for which they are eligible. Others suggested a *“universal application that can be used [to support] different grant opportunities.”* Such an application would entail *“writing about my personal practice, speaking about community, like what communities are you in both as an artist and for your intended audience...[if] that could be used as an anchor and then there could be some supplementary questions for different programs...that would just be a kind of a game-changer”* because it would reduce the need to parse each funding opportunity for specific eligibility criteria and tailor applications accordingly.

Make funding applications and review processes more culturally responsive. Interviewees also brought up the need for funding applications, as well as processes for reviewing those applications, to be more culturally responsive to Native creators’ preferences and norms.

With regard to applications, some interviewees described a personal aversion, or aversion among other creators they know, to seek funding from mainstream performing arts funders at all. In at least one case, this aversion was rooted in the Native cultural

norm of *“not talking about yourself.”* Instead, this individual felt more comfortable to *“have other people talk about you, or have your experiences speak for themselves,”* but few current funding applications allow for the value of one’s work to be communicated in such a manner. Interviewees also described feeling daunted by creating budgets because doing so sometimes necessitates ascribing a monetary value to practices that are rooted in long-held cultural traditions: *“I think funders...need to understand that this is a lifetime of wisdom and knowledge—and not just one lifetime, but many lifetimes because it’s intergenerational. It’s being passed generation to generation to generation, and you can’t easily put a price tag on that.”*

Interviewees also said that application review processes *“don’t feel Indigenous to me”* if the evaluators are not *“culturally appropriate to review [the] work.”* One interviewee, who self-identifies as a multidisciplinary artist and creates work about existing *“in between”* their Native identity and other cultural identities, described the gulf between their own lived experiences and those of some review boards as a *“nightmare.”* They lamented that grant reviewers often *“just don’t see it—they don’t see the value in [my work], or it doesn’t fit into exactly how they are scoring it with a rubric.”*

To mitigate these challenges, more than half of interviewees recommended that more Native individuals—alongside more culturally knowledgeable non-Natives—be involved in crafting funding applications, doing outreach about funding opportunities, making funding decisions, and following up on the use of funds. During the funding outreach and application phases, some interviewees suggested offering resources geared explicitly toward Native creators like *“a hotline for Indigenous artists”* seeking grants or grant-writing support. Others expressed a desire for funders to put more effort into proactively seeking out and inviting creators who may not currently be aware of or comfortable applying for existing opportunities to pursue them. Then, evaluation of funding applications could be conducted by a panel—or as one phrased it, a *“community board”*—whom Native creators and communities deem *“relevant and appropriate.”* Ideally, community boards would include reviewers *“from [Indigenous] communities,”* or non-Natives who thoroughly *“understand these arts,”* are not exclusively versed in *“traditional Eurocentric artmaking,”* and have direct experience with the *“intended audiences”* for the work.

Interviewees stressed the importance for reviewers to have a high level of cultural knowledge of and integration within Native communities in part because of the proliferation—throughout the arts, as well as academia and other sectors in which individuals can rise to public prominence—of “Pretendians” who “receive big opportunities or big money based on their claim to being Native American,” but “what they bring to the forefront...is stuff that’s fake and phony.” Interviewees noted that this issue is further complicated because for every one individual whose claims to being Native may be contentious, there are “a lot [more] folks in the diaspora that know their ancestors, but because of the shittiness of our society [were] raised outside of [the Native] community,” and are now “trying to authentically...build that community.” Parsing the former group from the latter can be challenging, but interviewees indicated that it is of the utmost importance. Public attention around Native creators’ work inevitably reflects back on the tribal communities they represent or claim to represent. When a work gains traction in the media, one playwright explained, it is often “the one time my tribe would ever be mentioned in the New York Times, so whatever gets said is suddenly like, so much more important...because you’re operating as like a tiny diplomat of your nation at all times.” For this reason, “the idea that there are people who go around like outwardly representing [a specific tribe or Natives more broadly] without knowing what their responsibility to those people was is like very, very, very dangerous.” It creates “such a big divide...between people who have community accountability and people who don’t.”

Thus, interviewees advocated for funders to also consider whether “tribes can be partners in that process” of reviewing applications so they have a role in “decid[ing] who gets to tell their stories,” posing “questions like who they [the creators] are, who are their people...and why is this important to them as an artist?” Taking such measures may help shift the funding environment away from present conditions under which it is sometimes the case that “the people with the least ties to community are the people who are making the most money.” While interviewees recognized that making the necessary changes to current application and review practices “might be hard if you’ve got thousands of people applying,” making strides toward such changes should be prioritized because “it is your duty, if you’re giving money away, to give people the best chance that you can.”

Increase accountability to Native communities regarding the outcomes of the work funders support.

Alongside building more cultural responsiveness into the application review process is a need to carry through this cultural responsiveness to the end of the grant. Regarding how funders disburse and track their awards, interviewees articulated a need to engage in thoughtful follow-up with the communities for whom funds were meant to support to assess whether the intended outcomes were achieved.

Interviewees have seen numerous projects and organizations that received financial support ultimately do more harm than good to Native communities. Particularly in cases where *“these outside institutions come in and do programming that is not coming from the ground up,”* one theater-maker has *“seen so many examples of damage that has been done to the public.”* Yet this interviewee knows that funders are often unaware of such outcomes because they *“never go back and find out from the community that this did damage to our community,”* which means that they *“just keep funding”* those institutions. To keep such situations from persisting, interviewees recommended that funders *“go back and talk to the community and said ‘Hey, how’d this go?’”* One suggested that funders could expand reporting requirements and ask grantees questions such as, *“What are you bringing back home [to your community]?”* These measures would increase the extent to which Native communities can serve as *“our own gatekeepers.”*

“in the funding world...it’s still separated: there’s arts, and there’s... the services we’re giving community. And we are stuck in the middle and not getting the funding we need.”

Implement more flexible grant requirements to better support Native creators’ autonomy.

Once funded, interviewees expressed a need for greater autonomy over their work. They expressed frustration that current funding requirements often mandate specific creative processes and outputs and described how this could hinder their work. For example, a theater-maker described narrow grant requirements to be *“a big problem”* facing a project they envisioned that involved creating an original play, in the process also supporting Native community members involved in the project by providing them food, shelter, and on-the-job training. The theater-maker described struggling to secure investments in the project precisely because of the multiple objectives it was meant to achieve. The interviewee commented that at the same time that *“all the theater funders said no”* because they would *“only fund this formative thing [the written play itself],”* the funders whose



interests might include *“the food and support for the job training we’re doing [also] said no, because you’re doing art. We kept falling between.”* They then observed that *“in the funding world...it’s still separated: there’s arts, and there’s...the services we’re giving community. And we are stuck in the middle and not getting the funding we need.”*

Moving funding practices toward allowing for greater flexibility regarding outputs or ways of working would afford Native creators, in the words of one, *“actual support, without expectation.”* One interdisciplinary creator stated plainly, *“The dream is unrestricted awards that last multiple years and come with no reporting or administration, right?”* While they acknowledged that such a complete systemic overhaul would take considerable time and effort to realize, many creators expressed a desire for incremental progress toward this vision, with funders structuring more opportunities around *“unrestricted funding”* or *“non-reciprocal granting”*—conditions they cited as being conducive to cultivating a greater sense of creative autonomy. Ideally, such funding opportunities would be *“more open-ended...less concerned with having a presentable, tourable, packagable product, and...more [about] actually investing in the artists.”* While at present such opportunities are rare, a sound artist expressed gratitude for an unrestricted award from a trusting funder and believes *“that if [more funding] organizations took a chance and really told artists like, ‘No, really—make anything, you know, talk about anything,’ they would be happy with the outcome.”*

Making funding requirements more flexible could also grant creators more temporal autonomy via less rigid grant timelines. Currently, interviewees described their funding sources as being largely structured around funders’ fiscal years, which do not necessarily account for Native creators’ process or sense of time. One interviewee described the majority of their funding as coming with *“the expectation that within the same grant timeline you’re going to write the grant, make the piece...present it, and have a final product, within one grant cycle.”* Yet another explained that while from a funder’s perspective *“a year might seem like a long project timeline for an organization,”* these timelines often do not take into account the gig-based nature of many creators’ work and the often piecemeal approach they must take to making a living: *“When we [creators] are also balancing how many other jobs and other gigs and other projects,”*

meeting rigid grant deadlines “just becomes kind of impossible.” Thus, they desired “more awards that are spread out, like over one to five years,” which “lengthens the time that we’re given to work on something.” Ideally, such opportunities would alleviate the pressure-laden question that runs through one interviewee’s mind each day: “What are the ways in which I can gain more time to make the work that I can make without having to live what I now call ‘hashtag stipend life’?”

Acknowledge and support a fuller range of Native creators’ labor and needs. Several interviewees expressed a desire for funding that would support the entire creative process and acknowledge the full scope of labor that goes into creating and sharing their work. One musician explained that they are often asked to “just show up and sing a song” when, in reality, the work that goes into this is much more involved, typically including writing, composing, rehearsing, and building essential relationships with the local community—Native or otherwise—with whom they will share their work. In the words of another interviewee, this results in “a lot more work than the hours that they’re paying me.” Compounding the effort involved in producing and sharing creative work is the extra effort of educating those in their midst—whether creative collaborators, presenting partners, funders, or audiences—who “don’t identify as being Native or Indigenous” and may lack cultural sensitivity. Interviewees described “taking a lot of extra time to do cultural competency” work to have successful working relationships with these groups. One captured the essence of this labor: “I want to walk into a theater and just be an artist, but I have to walk into the theater and be an artist and an educator.” Such interviewees expressed a desire for funders to recognize and account for this “extra cultural and emotional labor” when making awards to Native creators.

Interviewees also said that compensating for the full range of their creative labor would include funding for their basic needs—those that need to be met first to produce work at their highest capacity. These needs included “space to work,” “culture-specific mental health support,” and funds to cover food, housing, health care, child/family care, and community-building. These basic needs also included the time and energy of other individuals who support their creative work, such as “financial planners” to help creators think through issues such as, “What happens when we

Interviewees expressed frustration about seeing funders “*giving funding to diversify predominantly white institutions...which are like, ‘You know what, maybe we’ll do...two days of Native programming this year’ whereas [Native-led community-based organizations] are doing 365 days of Native programming.*”

need to rest? How does a performing artist retire?” Illustrating the difference such support makes, one creator commented that the best funding opportunity they’d ever received was a residency in which many of these basic needs—space, meals, transportation, mental health and medical care, and child/family care—were covered. This made them feel “*completely taken care of emotionally, physically, spiritually*” and maximized their capacity to focus on and dedicate energy to their creative work.

Put more resources behind supporting Native-led community-building; specifically, support community-based collaborations, organizations, and spaces. One of the essential resources interviewees described drawing on to inspire and carry out their practice is their communities, inclusive of family, friends, fellow creators, and fellow members of their tribal nations. Interviewees described myriad benefits of creating their work with and within these communities, including the fact that working in Native spaces and collaborating with other Native people can be conducive to producing their most inspired work. One interviewee explained that when they create, they are acting as a “*vessel for ancestral spirits*” and that tapping into those spirits is “*always the strongest whenever I’m within [my tribal] community.*”

For these reasons and others, interviewees expressed a strong desire to do more work with and within community. As one costume designer commented, “*Being given more space, more opportunity to work with other Native theater artists is...the new dream for me.*” Consequently, interviewees would like more finan-

cial support for creator-led community-based collaborations. Such funding could support leadership development among Native creators; financial incentives for established creators who *“mentor young artists, or [who] add someone up and coming into [their] project”*; opportunities to foster *“collectives”* or *“cohorts”* of Native artists; or in-community programs including but not limited to *“community talking circles and story circles”* and *“cultural immersion programs.”*

In addition to more supports for creator-initiated community collaborations, one-quarter of interviewees would like to see more supports for Native-led organizations doing community-based work. Interviewees expressed frustration about seeing funders *“giving funding to diversify predominantly white institutions... which are like, ‘You know what, maybe we’ll do...two days of Native programming this year’ whereas [Native-led community-based organizations] are doing 365 days of Native programming.”* Such Native community-based organizations are, from the perspectives of interviewees, relatively invisible within the current landscape of performing arts funding. A self-described producer, artist, facilitator, and activist commented that while there is a robust *“network of...Indian country performing arts,”* this network is *“not very visible to funders, I don’t think. Once you find it it’s like, ‘Oh, okay, there’s a hub of humans that you can go to for building this work with integrity,’ but I think that funders often feel like they just don’t, they don’t see it. Like I think there’s a level of invisibility there that needs combating.”* They then added that *“there’s Indigenous organizations doing work”* on combating this invisibility, and that identifying and working with these organizations could be a first step for funders.

Finally, several interviewees expressed hope that funders would be willing to invest in building more new spaces for creation within Native communities. One elder who engages in dance-based culture-bearing has noticed a current *“lack of venues for showcasing Native art,”* whereas earlier in their life, there were enough spaces that *“we could dance [somewhere different] every night and make a living off of that. That’s not true nowadays.”* Consequently, *“I really think that they need to put more emphasis, more funding”* into creating more such spaces. One sound-based creator underscored the need for more such spaces, speaking about how transformative they can be within Native communities, but how few

and far between they are at present: *“My overall dream when it comes to art in South Dakota...is that one day on every rez there can be like, a huge building”* that would be a space for creative freedom and community celebration of that freedom. Describing why, they went on to say that *“there’s so many artists from my era [who didn’t “succeed” creatively or continue to pursue their creative practices]...and it’s not because they didn’t try, it’s not because they didn’t do a good promo game, it’s because the community wasn’t built to [support their practice]. And so, ultimately, I want to see communities celebrate themselves a bit more, and I feel like the way to change that is through building...[community] art spaces.”*

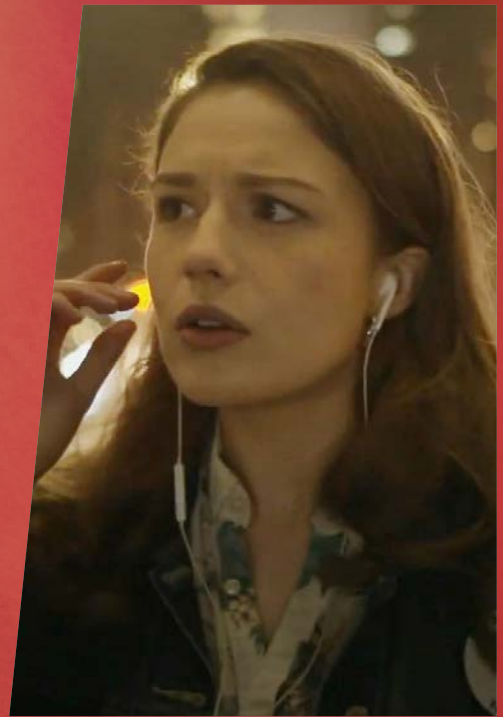
CONCLUSION

Across the United States, the events of 2020 led to a surge of public interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, and high hopes about the prospects of systemic change. Within the performing arts sector, this interest has created an opportunity to shine a brighter spotlight on Native creators and other creators of color than ever before. This study has sought to cast this spotlight specifically on Native performance-based creators’ practices, motivations, and needs, in their own words.

While some creators interviewed for this study expressed skepticism that this sudden surge of interest could be sustained in the long-term, others viewed this as a moment of possibility for making real strides toward cultural equity. For strides to be made sincerely and systematically within the U.S. performing arts sector, interviewees hoped that those in power would take into account their perspectives when reflecting on questions such as, *“Who are the decision-makers within the performing arts sector? How and where are decisions being made? To whom should those decisions be accountable?”* As those who hold power in the performing arts sector seek to convert such reflections into action, interviewees are eagerly awaiting to find out if the perspectives they have shared will be *“[taken] to heart, or if it’ll just be in one ear, out the other.”*







Appendix: Research Approach

Research questions

Together, the NORC and First Peoples Fund teams refined the broad topics we aimed to explore through this project into the following research questions:

1. What performance-based practices do Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native creators engage in?
2. Why do Native creators engage in their practices, and how do they go about doing so?
 - a. Why do Native creators engage in their work?
 - b. How do the intended purposes of their work connect to where, how, and for whom they choose to make and present their work?
3. What resources and systemic changes do Native creators identify as high-priority needs? (i.e., What challenges do Native creators experience in their practice and what resources do they need to address these challenges?)

Research design

This study was built upon principles of community-based participatory research, a framework for collaborative research in which members of the communities being studied are full partners with deliberately shared power across all aspects of the research effort.¹ For this project, Native collaborators with direct knowledge of and experience with performance-based practices in Native communities helped shape each step of the process, including generating the research questions, refining the research design, and offering perspectives on the interpretation of findings.

Between early 2020 and mid-2021, the core research team created and implemented a three-phase research design to address the above research questions. While this research design originally included in-person interviews with Native creators and opportunities to engage with their performance-based work firsthand, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to a remote-only plan.

¹ Israel et al., *Methods of Community Based Participatory Research*.

Phase 1. Planning, network-building, and background research

Phase 1 of the research design involved two activities that laid the groundwork for creating a database of Native creators engaged in performance-based practices, as well as key events and organizations that support or provide outlets for these creators. The database would then be used in subsequent phases of the project to identify individuals to interview for this study.

This phase began with the research team conducting desk research to compile publicly available information on Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native individuals and organizations involved in performance-based artistic and cultural practices. Desk research included web searches and targeted social media searches across multiple platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok). The team conducted searches for both individual artists and organizations, as well as searches for existing databases or lists of such artists and organizations that had been compiled by sources such as professional associations.

The team complemented the desk research by engaging in network-building and key expert interviews. In close consultation with First Peoples Fund (FPF), the team began with the network FPF has cultivated over its 26-year history of partnering with Native communities and supporting Native culture-bearers and artists. The research team connected with seven key experts, each of whom is deeply embedded within the Native performance-based arts and culture community, Native communities in specific regions, and/or the performing arts community more generally. These individuals provided insights on their area of expertise and recommendations for individuals or organizations to reach out to in subsequent research phases, enabling the research team to use a snowball sampling approach to identify Phase 2 interviewees. Key experts also reviewed the research team's existing lists of relevant creators and organizations and provided additional suggestions.

This phase resulted in a finalized database of creators and organizations relevant to the research study who would be eligible for contacting in Phase 2. The database summarized salient information about each individual/organization, such as descriptions of their work, geographic location, tribal affiliation (where relevant), and contact information.

Phase 2. Primary data collection

From the database created in Phase 1, the research team, in consultation with First Peoples Fund, selected 39 individuals for in-depth interviews. To select interviewees, the research team developed selection criteria that ensured a diversity of perspectives across the following factors: interviewees' geographic region, tribal affiliation, artistic or cultural forms practiced, age/generation, and years of experience with their practice.

One or more members of the research team conducted interviews via Zoom or telephone. Interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes long and were audio- or video-recorded for later transcription. All interviewees gave their informed consent. Prior to beginning the interviews, NORC's internal Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the First Peoples Fund staff reviewed and approved the interview guide and interview invitation language.

Interview topics included how individuals self-define their practice, the nature of their training in that practice, what motivates them to create, what audiences they create for, the types of venues in which they engage in their work, which key resources they and their peers rely on to carry out their work, what modifications to existing resources are needed, what sorts of resources that do not currently exist are needed, and what the key factors or resources are that make the difference between feeling well-supported as a creator and not. While the research design also originally called for follow-up in-person visits with a selection of creators to garner further context and nuance, the COVID-19 pandemic made this infeasible.

Phase 3. Analysis

Transcriptions of the recorded interviews, along with the original audio and video files, were analyzed in MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis software. The research team engaged in thematic content analysis of the transcripts using a combination deductive (*a priori*) and inductive qualitative coding approach, which included independent coding by multiple researchers and cross-comparison to ensure interrater reliability. The findings were then synthesized to create this report.



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