

## CULTURAL GROUNDING REMARKS

*Did We Get What We Asked For?*

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As I reflected on my journey as a cultural warrior, I quickly realized that I found myself in the right place, at the right time. This journey, which is not yet completed, has taken me up and down roads that had curves and hills and obstacles and challenges and yes, successes. It is so wonderful to be in the room with people, warriors, who know this road so well.

I have been asked to respond to Jack's paper as a former employee of the National Endowment for the Arts, someone who started in a program, Expansion Arts and who left as Special Assistant to the chairman Frohnmeyer with responsibility to stop the leaks within the agency. To find the mole. In the chairman's office, I truly gained a different perspective about our work in Expansions Arts.

My first and second read of the Jack's paper lead me to write----ah ha, is that what we were doing, is that what happened. Neo-liberalism, Hmmm. As veterans, we look back and move forward to foster change. To make a difference. And to follow our heads and our hearts, offering all of our talents.

During the 80s, there were multiple leadership agendas within the organization and multiple strategies in action at all or most times. There was the leadership of politics and there was the leadership of moral principle, grounded in history, perspective and experiences in America.

While at the Endowment, I worked under two chairmen: Frank Hodsell, a conservative Republican and John Frohnmeyer, a liberal Republican. AB Spellman was crazy enough to hire me and all but one person in the office were from North Carolina.

At the NEA during the 80s, there was the leadership of politics, those who tolerated cultural equity and viewed it as a political necessity. For this group of leaders, the Expansion Arts Program was there when there was a need to

write a compelling letter to a constituent of a Congressman or the White House. When the Latino or Black caucus inquired, Expansion Arts responded. The NEA political leadership fostered policies such as funding amounts based on budget sizes by formula. And more money to go to the states, which would mean less federal government.

I believe the leadership conservatives' lost some sleep when the Association of American Cultures or TAAC was founded because they no longer had control of the voices of color from inside the NEA.

The other leadership group at the NEA during this time was \_\_\_\_\_, warriors who knew that our time inside the belly of the beast would be limited. We were conversant on many topics from aesthetics, art forms, genres to culture, ethnicity and yes, politics and policy. (As Vantile Whitfield said to me, I hired AB because he could rap.) We were renegades who talked with and often whispered with those of you in this room and many more who are no longer with us, but still whisper to us. Jack Jackson, Elma Lewis, Catherine Dunham, Gordon Braithwaite, Vantile Whitfield, and

many others who still whisper to us from their ancestral thrones.

One major distinction between these two leadership groups, who were occasionally combative, was principles that grounded the policies and values set by each group.

The renegades believed that the arts should not be separated from the culture that grounded that art. The conservatives believed that the arts, aesthetics was more important than community. The renegades believed that we worked for the people and our job was to give you your money back, not create unnecessary barriers for you to get it. We opened the window, but AB Spellman would say: “when you are writing guidelines, open the window just wide enough to let the people in that you want to get the money. Wise words.

The conservatives believed the best, as defined by European values of art, should get 99% of the funding and the accolades. These conservatives believed that labeling it Black Arts and Latino Art and Rural Arts---and work that came from these communities could only be but so good. We, the

renegades believed that there was value, profound value in organizations that were deeply rooted in and reflective of communities, and that the art created of and by artists in these communities was indeed the best that American could offer.

Conservatives believed that X Arts was an affirmative action program. We believed that it was a program that supported the arts across disciplines designed to express the culture of inner city and rural Americans.

Now I don't mean to paint a picture of all white people and then all people of color. The conservatives and renegades were both of mixed of all colors and various levels within the NEA. Sometimes the neo-liberal looked like me, but perhaps not as southern.

NEA policies supported and fostered neo-liberalism by encouraging euro-centric organizations to “serve diverse communities”, funded them to do hire artist of color, supported to launch audience development diversity initiatives, and encouraged them to find one Clarence Thomas for their board,

then turned around and asked organizations of color “what are you doing?” which really meant---“we don’t need you anymore because NY City Ballet has Latino dancers and African American audiences. They challenged our artist institutions to create new work, ignoring the fact that the public and private sector in some communities, particularly down south, was not funding our organizations at a level where every season was full of new works. I know this from attempting to raise money in my region for organizations of color and from continuing to be a grantmaker.

Free trade means the survival of the fittest. Survival of the fittest means how milk toast can you be and receive and maintain financial support. How much like something else can you appear to be?

The major point for me in all this is we, the renegades at NEA, did what we did back then because we had a moral and ethical compass that guided our actions, even when we were not sure of how to do what was needed. We believed deeply that we were there for you and you and you, and not for our retirement. I ask you today, how are you holding those who are still there

accountable to you now?

Did we, the renegades of the 80's get what we asked for, what we fought for, back then? Perhaps you all are better placed to answer that question.

We asked for equity funding, not equality funding.

We asked for better policies that promoted organizations and artist of color, allow applicants to compete on a level playing field---whatever that meant.

We asked for diversity among the panels, staff, especially senior staff and leadership.

We asked for state and local arts councils to be accountable in there funding.

We asked you, Expansion Arts Organizations, to document your work. To record your own history so that the stories we are telling today can be written for future generations.

We asked for national arts policies that challenged the euro-centric organizations to include us and our communities at every level of the organization. We did not ask them to do that and sacrifice your organizations in the process.

We asked for leadership to support the dialogue of equity out into the private sector where our organizations were always getting less funding.

Were we promoting neo-liberlism? Again, time and you might be a better judge of that.

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Finally, I believe our challenge now is how do we keep the Expansion Arts family, both old and new, connected. How do we bring the organizations from the smaller communities, the Charlottes, the Durham, the Knoxville, the Milwaukee, involved?

How do we indoctrinate the young lions into the fundamental of whys---why

we do what we do? Why it is still important to have our own? Why we must view competition differently? How we must mentor and be mentees?

How do you address the Condolisa Rice who is an artist, but may not be speaking out on our behalf?

How do we link leaders n small communities with what is going on in the Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles?