

Progressing Issues of Social Importance Through the Work of Indigenous Artists:

*A Social Impact Evaluation of the Native Arts and Cultures
Foundation's Pilot Community Inspiration Program*

Executive Summary



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**NATIVE
ARTS &
CULTURES
FOUNDATION**

The Community Inspiration Program Pilot Projects



*Left: Kealoha in rehearsal for The Story of Everything
Courtesy of the artist*

*Right: Repellent Fence
Courtesy of Postcommodity*



*Left: SHORE
Courtesy of Emily Johnson and Catalyst Dance*

*Right: New Frontier Lab + Native Forum
Courtesy of Sundance Institute*



Foreword May 2017

On behalf of the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation board and staff, we are pleased to provide you with an executive summary of a social impact evaluation of our Community Inspiration Program (CIP). We commend the CIP artists and communities for their creative vision, energy, and commitment in carrying out these outstanding projects. We are grateful for the time, research and expertise of Miriam Jorgensen, and Miskodagaaginkwe Beaudrie of the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona.

While listening and learning from artists, community members, and other stakeholders the CIP was piloted from 2014 – 2016. The work is intended to be thought provoking and educational, and to encourage indigenous perspectives, intercultural appreciation, and diverse approaches. It is meant to address cultural equity in our society by supporting artists and communities to bring their collective wisdom and knowledge to bear on some challenging concerns of this century.

When we started down this path, we made the decision to let the artists decide on project criteria rather than proscribe limitations or demand specific evaluative approaches. We introduced certain evaluative strategies like the “aesthetic qualities framework” later. There is also a need to include in this foreword, a little more context on indigenous research and methodologies brought forth by Postcommodity. It was a learning process for everyone involved and we have documented what we hope will be valuable and educational information for those interested in arts and social change work, especially as it pertains to Native artists and communities.

It is important to note that the history and experience of indigenous peoples in the Americas and even elsewhere foretells a deep attachment to place and “homeland”. There is knowledge conveyed in oral tradition through songs, chants, and stories that documents this living connection with the sanctity of “place”. Essays and books by scholars have described the impacts of removing Native peoples from their homelands, and delegitimizing their culture and knowledge as primitive. The colonizing of the Americas was linked to the practice of imperialism and the quest for power, land, and control over resources. This worldview was tied to the belief that western Eurocentric knowledge and ways of knowing and seeing the world was the ultimate truth. All other knowledge, cultures, and value systems were considered inferior and ignored or destroyed.

This is why in contemporary Native society today, especially in political and academic institutions, the English word used to describe what happened to indigenous peoples is “colonization”. The definition of colonization includes the taking of land and resources by a dominant power and if the people of that “taken” place do not assimilate into the culture and worldview of the dominant power, the peoples and cultures that threaten the “colonizer” are destroyed. When we speak of destruction, it includes the decimation of intellectual life and indigenous truths that form the very basis of a worldview upon which indigenous civilizations have relied.

In the 20th century, indigenous scholars and researchers began writing about the need for indigenous communities to reclaim their knowledge and thought worlds; to decolonize and claim their sovereignty; to become self-determined and enable practices that are based on indigenous beliefs, actions and experiences. What’s encouraging is that arts and culture practices continue to have resurgence in many Native communities across this nation.

While overt emphasis on an Indigenous worldview was not correlated with effectiveness in the CIP projects, decolonization and self-determination indirectly motivates some of the processes that the CIP projects employed and the approaches in which they were evaluated. In particular, *Reclaiming Scholarship: Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies*, (CIRM), provided Postcommodity with the guiding principles for Repellent Fence and engaging with the

transborder community of Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Mexico. These principles are referred to as the 4Rs: Relationality, Responsibility, Respect, and Reciprocity / Accountability. The research posits that the “community-driven nature of CIRM should not be taken as an argument that this kind of research is in any way anti-intellectual or non-empirical; rather, there is a sense in making a case for CIRM that it can both serve the needs of the people – *as defined by the people* – and push intellectual inquiries further in ways consistent with Indigenous understandings of empiricism, multi-sensory learning, service, and responsibility.”¹ This CIRM perspective and its principles share similar aspects with the *aesthetic qualities* framework described in this report.

There are many people and organizations we would like to thank for the help and advice they have provided over the past four years of the CIP effort that has brought us to this point:

- Darren Walker and the Ford Foundation for their unflagging support of our mission;
- Kalliopeia Foundation for their belief that we could make our vision a reality;
- Dawn Webster and Alan Tang for the genesis of our *Big Idea*;
- Arlene Goldbard, Joe Lambert, and Paul Harder for their early input;
- Diane Espaldon for her early research;
- Kealoha, Kade Twist, Raven Chacon, Cristobal Martinez, Emily Johnson, and Bird Running Water for their passion, cooperation, and willingness to grow;
- Reuben Tomas Roqueni, our former Program Director, for his perseverance in getting the early pilots off the ground (no pun intended);
- Miriam Jorgensen and Miskodagaaginkwe Beaudrie as primary authors and researchers of the report;
- Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon of Animating Democracy / Americans for the Arts and the participants of the Evaluation Learning Lab for devising the aesthetics evaluation methodology;
- All of our friends and colleagues who have listened to us, supported us, and provided constructive feedback.

With warm wishes and aloha,

T. Lulani Arquette
President / CEO

Susan Jenkins
Chairwoman

¹ Brayboy, Bryan McK. J., Gough, Heather R., Leonard, Beth, Roehl, Roy F., and Jessica A. Solyom. “Reclaiming Scholarship: Critical Indigenous Research Methodologies.” *Qualitative Research: An Introduction to Methods and Design*. Ed. Stephen D. Lapan, MaryLynn T. Quartaroli, and Frances J. Reimer. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012, pp. 423-450.

PROGRESSING ISSUES OF SOCIAL IMPORTANCE THROUGH THE WORK OF INDIGENOUS ARTISTS:

A Social Impact Evaluation of the Native Arts & Cultures Foundation's Pilot Community Inspiration Program

Executive Summary

In 2014, the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation (NACF) launched a new initiative, the Community Inspiration Program (CIP), which is rooted in the understanding that arts and cultures projects have an important role to play in motivating community engagement and supporting social change.

This report considers the social impacts of the 2014 CIP projects—what effects did they have on communities and on the issues, conversations, and connections that are critical in those communities? Its secondary purpose is to provide the NACF with ideas for how to improve its grant making in support of arts for community change.

In our usage, for a CIP project to have “social impact,” it should *make a difference in communities*. “Social change” is the idea of *moving in a desired direction on an issue of community importance and social relevance*. Thus, a project has social impact if it progresses social change.

I. Background on the Community Inspiration Program

The NACF's goal for the CIP is to fund artist-driven projects that connect diverse people in discussing and addressing pressing social, cultural, and environmental concerns. The basic program strategy is to identify and fund unique projects that are led or co-led by Native artists, speak to issues of contemporary relevance and social importance, and engage a community or communities in the process of social change.

In 2014-2015, the CIP's pilot year, NACF funded four projects:

- ***The Story of Everything*** (TSOE), an epic spoken word poem at the heart of a larger performance embracing dance, music, and visual imagery that focuses on climate change; explores big bang theory and evolution; and reminds listeners of the veracity of Indigenous knowledges.
- ***Repellent Fence***, an ephemeral installation of 26 super-sized, helium-filled scare-eye balloons tethered in a line perpendicular to the international border dividing the city of Douglas, Arizona, USA/Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico that queries border policy and its byproducts.
- ***SHORE***, a performance installation combining story, volunteerism, performance, and feasting that challenges audience members/participants to be “in community” with one another.
- ***Sundance Native Forum***, a workshop event built onto its New Frontier Lab program, that engaged Native artists, activists, and innovative media makers in conversations and working sessions focused on transmedia storytelling for social and environmental justice.

II. Evaluation Frameworks

Impact evaluation of the NACF CIP combines three research approaches. It considers and collects both usual and nontraditional “measures” of social change, queries and observes aesthetic quality impacts (as defined by the Evaluation Learning Lab, a collaborative effort of Americans for the Arts’ *Animating Democracy* initiative, the Arts x Culture x Social Justice Network, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation), and relies on the guidance of Indigenous research strategies. The result is a textured but similarly structured set of findings that simultaneously emphasize the diversity of the projects and allow comparisons and contrasts among them.

III. Individual CIP Project Impacts

The Story of Everything

Kealoha’s intentions with *TSOE* are to help audiences wrestle with the question of whether it is productive to polarize western science and Indigenous knowledge; to widen conversations about the intersections of culture and science, especially around climate change; and to motivate youth, and especially Native Hawaiian youth, to see science as something doable.

To work toward these outcomes, Kealoha workshopped his performance in February 2015 and performed portions of it for school audiences over the summer. The entire performance premiered in September in Honolulu, and a modified version debuted on the mainland in October. Each performance concluded with an opportunity for audience engagement, at which interaction ranged from praise, to questions of about science, to socio-political discussions concerning Native Hawaiian rights.

At least a thousand people experienced all or parts of *TSOE* between February and October 2015. Discussions about the performance have appeared in diverse media outlets including *Hawaii Public Radio*, the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, the *Huffington Post*, and *Idyllwild Town Crier*.

Audience responses to *TSOE* suggest that Kealoha succeeded in connecting with audiences/participants at an emotional level and in disrupting audiences’ thinking in every way he had hoped. More specifically:

- *TSOE* encouraged viewers/participants to see equivalences and parallels in Indigenous and western knowledges. In Hawaii, the pride that emanated from this experience led to calls for *TSOE* to be included in school curricula.
- *TSOE* caused numerous viewers/participants to rethink their responsibilities for climate change and their own roles in slowing or stopping it. In answer to the question, “After seeing *TSOE*, do you have the same, lesser, or greater hope that people can come together to solve climate change?” (posed in an online, post-premiere survey) 43 of 69 respondents (62%) said “greater.”
- *TSOE* intervened in a highly contentious conversation about placing another large telescope atop Mauna Kea by providing the community with new ways to discuss the subject. Kealoha also had the opportunity to model these conversations at the Hawaii premiere.
- *TSOE*’s multi-phase execution, Kealoha’s invitation to participate in *TSOE*’s evolution through feedback, and his responsiveness to that advice challenged artists and other community members to see that arts and cultures projects can be done “differently.”

Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente

Postcommodity's aim with *Repellent Fence* was to inspire binational dialogue and replace reductive understandings of the border with an understanding of the border as a place of interconnectivity.

The *Repellent Fence* is not only a land art installation. It is also a social collaboration, involving individuals, communities, businesses, institutional organizations, publics, and sovereigns. To mount the installation, Postcommodity worked with multiple landowners and various governing authorities for permissions and land access. To co-develop the project locally, Postcommodity engaged artists, merchants, community organizations, and governments on both sides of the border. To seed key discussions about art and politics, Postcommodity networked with Indigenous and non-Indigenous social practice artists and cultural practitioners and participated with them in installation weekend events. To broaden the project's impact, Postcommodity engaged the regional and national arts sectors (galleries, museums, arts service organizations, commentators, and funders) in experiencing the *Repellent Fence*.

It is impossible to count the number of visitors who came to Douglas/Agua Prieta to view the *Repellent Fence* from October 10-12, 2015. But all events and activities were well attended, and every hotel in Douglas save the Motel 6 was booked full for the weekend. The project was covered by mainstream and niche press (from the *Los Angeles Times* to *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*) and was the subject of a four-part feature in the activist publication *Beacon Broadside*.

No matter who one talked to during the land art installation, no matter the venue in which something was discussed, and no matter the medium in which something was published/posted, people were talking about *Repellent Fence* as a challenge—a disruption—to how they thought. More than that, participants in these conversations were using similar ideas and phrases to make their points about the challenges to their thinking (including “suturing the border,” “erasing the border,” “binational cooperation and collaboration” and “I crossed the line for art”), showing the stickiness of ideas the *Repellent Fence* inspired. Numerous conversations have begun, changed, or moved forward faster as a result of *Repellent Fence*'s disruptiveness. For example:

- There are new ripples outward from the conversation among artist-advocates engaged in challenging current border political-economics.
- *Repellent Fence* added significantly to a conversation about binational collaboration as a way to increase Douglas and Agua Prieta artists' opportunities to make, show, and sell their art.
- The installation revitalized a conversation between Agua Prieta and Douglas municipal authorities about their MOU for binational cooperation.
- The events spurred a related realization conversation among local Mexican officials, who noted that they could finally do positive things from their offices.
- The events created space for conversations among and between residents and visitors about the realities of binationalism—what it means to live in one city but two worlds.

- The installation and surrounding events progressed a conversation among Indigenous peoples about international borders and the ruptures they cause in the practice of Indigenous culture and the exercise of collective rights.

The riskiness of the entire project amplified these results. The sheer audacity of a two-mile-long land art installation across the US-Mexico border drew people in, made them look, and made them think. As Cristóbal Martínez, a member of Postcommodity, explains: “As artists we are supposed to go to the places people cannot go and bring it to them to create an ethical consciousness.”

SHORE

Artist Emily Johnson’s intention with *SHORE*—a four-part installation featuring volunteerism (a community service project), story (a curated public reading), performance (a dance concert), and feast (a shared potluck meal)—is to restore a sense of community among audience members. As Johnson explains, “To make a good future is not easy. So we have to be active in that process always.”

With the NACF’s assistance, Johnson recreated her 2014 original Minneapolis-based production in four more cities in 2015: New York (April); Homer, AK (June); San Francisco (August); and Seattle (October). Johnson spent time in each performance location learning what it meant to be a member of that community. She held forums to learn about community strengths and needs and structured volunteerism at each site around this feedback. She met with children, teens, and local artists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and invited their contributions at the public reading. And she considered ways to produce and reproduce the awareness and practice of living in a particular community, so that she could bring that learning to bear in each local presentation of *SHORE*.

The New York event received significant media coverage, including articles in the *New York Times*, *This Week in New York*, and *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics, and Cultures*. The extent of this coverage is remarkable given the many competitors for attention from the arts and cultures press in New York. Coverage in other markets was more modest, but included a radio feature on *KQED*, San Francisco’s public radio station, and active blog coverage from *SHORE*’s Seattle presentation partner, *OnTheBoards*.

SHORE aligns with a larger effort across the arts and cultures sector that employs arts to foster democratic citizen engagement. What distinguishes Johnson’s work, however, is the scale of her vision. Emily does not seek to inspire her audience to work on a single project or become involved in a particular cause. Instead, she challenges the idea that a collection of atomistic individuals can be “a community.” She calls on her audience to be *in* community—in relationship—with one another, caring for one another, serving one another, appreciating one another, and becoming powerful together. Her work attempts to remind participants that there is no “I” in community, only “we.”

On the one hand, this is hard work; it requires intentionality and strategy; and it can take a long time. Long enough, in fact, that within the timeline of the NACF evaluation, little change—at the community or individual level—may be visible. On the other hand, the process has to start somewhere and with someone. Emily Johnson effectively asks, “Why not now, and why not among the participants in *SHORE*?”

Feedback suggests that *SHORE* did give rise to communal understanding and community meaning for many viewers/participants. Repetition across events and through different sensory experiences helped solidify this response. As one attendee summarized, “More than anything, what I take away is the sense of community, of shared space.”

Of course, not everyone who attended *SHORE* was affected by it. There were negative reviews, and there were people that didn’t “get it.” But such responses can only be expected in a project as ambitious and as challenging as *SHORE*. It is unrealistic to imagine that everyone who experienced the installation was prepared to hear its quietly insistent message, “gather here.”

Sundance Native Forum

Seeking to push the field of Native filmmaking into a new creative space, Sundance Institute presented a free *New Frontier Day Lab and Native Forum* on June 18-19, 2015 at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, in affiliation with the Allied Media Conference. The Forum’s goal was to inspire current and prospective Native filmmakers to become transmedia artists working on behalf of social and environmental justice—particularly social and environmental justice issues arising in their own communities. Participants had an opportunity to learn from the examples of others, to access technical information that could help them create in the transmedia space, and to participate in conversations with colleagues, both known and newly met.

Nearly 70 artists, youth, activists, innovative media makers, and field supporters participated in working sessions across the two days.

While the *Forum’s* success in inspiring more Native people to become transmedia artists is as-yet unknown, feedback on the event suggests that it will occur. For example, when asked about the effect of the *Forum* on participants’ practice, one attendee said, “I knew I wanted to do a piece with sign language before Native Lab, but my work here helped me understand and figure out how to actually do that, [how to] structure a screen play without a solidified concept. ...I went home to my reservation to talk to our last speaker who is living in a home and he doesn’t always have lucid moments, so for me it’s about preserving our language in a more modern context versus just looking at books, or YouTube, or archival footage that is often out of touch to our youth or [helpful for] actual language revitalization.”

IV. Comparisons and Contrasts

All of the CIP pilot projects produced significant social progress outcomes. The projects spoke to important social issues and increased the likelihood of future activism. They changed minds and inspired new thinking. They motivated new conversations and new activity. They offered tools and ideas for progressing Indigenous community self-determination. Most were highly visible to their relevant publics, including the broader “art world.” All have ongoing potential to produce such outcomes.

Comparisons and contrasts across the projects point to additional conclusions about project impact:

- **The articulation of a clear social impact goal was correlated with observable social impact.** When artists were able to clearly identify the concerns their projects addressed,

and the ways they hoped to interrupt the status quo, changes in viewers'/participants' thinking and actions were more apparent.

- **The phase of project development at the time of the NACF's investment was correlated with impact.** Projects that were still formative or in the process of development gave the artists and the NACF something to work on together—and may have given the NACF more ways to augment impact through funding and staff engagement.
- **Community engagement skills were correlated with project success.** The evidence from this four-project sample is that artists with strong community engagement capacities are able to broaden and deepen effects on communities.
- **Youth engagement may have been correlated with impact effectiveness.** The proposition that youth provide a natural means of promoting engagement and sustainability seemed to be borne out among the pilot CIP projects.
- **Overt emphasis on an Indigenous worldview was not correlated with effectiveness** in these CIP projects (although the evidence is mixed)

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Front cover, left to right: Israel Shotridge (Tlingit), Carver, Washington; Christopher Kai Morgan (Native Hawaiian), Choreographer, Maryland; Delina White (Ojibwe), Woodland Floral Textile Artist, Minnesota; Micah Kamohoali'i (Native Hawaiian), Kumu Hula, Hawaii

Back cover, left to right: G. Umi Kai (Native Hawaiian), Kumu Traditional Implements, Hawaii; Da-ka-ween Mehner (Tlingit/N'ishga), Visual Artist, Alaska; Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band Cherokee), Basketmaker, Oklahoma; Keola Beamer (Native Hawaiian), Singer/Songwriter, Hawaii

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