

# FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PRECONFERENCE



NASAA ASSEMBLY 2024

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO  
OCTOBER 23-26

## Proceedings

### Monday, October 21

#### Opening Session: Welcome, Program Sharing & Networking

#### National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Report

*Jennie Terman, Folk & Traditional Arts Specialist*

#### Takeaways

- 214th National Council on the Arts (NCA) meeting
  - Met October 24-25 to approve all fiscal year 2025 grants and fellowships
  - State and Regional Partnership Agreements will go to the NCA in March
  - 10/25 [Public session](#), "Understanding the Value & Impact of Local Arts Agencies," was available to attend virtually, and is available on NEA website
- Current NEA priorities
  - Arts & culture ecosystems
  - [ArtsHERE](#) pilot grant program announced first recipients in September
  - [Arts & health](#)
    - New task force and \$5M initiative
    - Optional arts, health and well-being funds available for state and regional partners to apply for as part of their Partnership Agreements
- FY2025 NEA budget: \$210.1M proposed, awaiting approval from Congress
  - \$3.1M increase from FY2024
  - 40% goes to state and regional partnerships
- NEA staffing
  - Folk & traditional arts team currently includes:
    - 1 folk & traditional arts specialist (Jennie Terman)
    - 1 assistant grants management specialist (Lauren DeMarco)
    - Support from multidisciplinary arts & equity division coordinator (Erin Waylor)

- FTA team vacancies:
  - Folk & traditional arts director position just finished accepting applications
  - Additional folk & traditional arts specialist position awaiting posting
- Hiring first director for Native arts and tribal affairs
- Folk & traditional arts portfolio overview
  - [Grants for Arts Projects](#)
  - Folk Arts Partnerships with states/jurisdictions and regional partners
  - [National Heritage Fellowships](#)
    - 2024 Fellows recently recognized in D.C.
  - [National Folklife Network](#)
  - Folk & traditional arts also supported through [Challenge America](#), [Arts Education Partnership](#), [Our Town](#)

## Tuesday, October 22

### Islandwise: Sustaining Cultural Heritage in Island Contexts

#### Takeaways

- *Jessabet Vivas Capo, Puerto Rico*
  - Context of Puerto Rico before and after Hurricane Maria
  - Political context, debt; led to the larger question: are we going to be able to rebuild Puerto Rico or are we going to pay the debt?
  - A whole generation of PR people who have only ever lived in economic precarity.
  - Tax incentives for those to move into PR; a great deal of coastal enterprises are privatized (big hotels and developments). This leads to an expensive housing market and cost of living that is not balanced with the average wage.
  - Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP) getting a cut of 90% of the operating budget—the biggest cut of similar agencies. Creates a new environment of increasing reliance on external funding and collaborations (NEA, Mellon Foundation)
  - Artists of PR have experienced the most damage among the professions.
  - Projects:
    - Cultural Factories, including components such as pitch days.
      - The Cultural Practitioners Project: designed to give artists the tools that they need to maximize.
      - Important that all artists have the ability to live a dignified life.
      - Need to understand the economic possibilities of our work
    - Puerto Rican "activism"

- Designed to address experiences of racism in PR through artistic expression.
  - Hesitancy by many to address racism in PR—which is different from the United States but equally pervasive; institutions have much to do with that.
    - A legend or mythos of sorts of three races coming together as an image for PR that has been proliferated (even through imagery by ICP) that tends to obscure the reality of life on the island, especially for folks of African descent. A need for the institution to take responsibility and talk about it. ICP is nearly 70 years old; not easy to change institutions. However, it is vital for placemaking.
    - Population has increased so much but many new residents do not engage with or attend events, which exacerbates racism and xenophobia.
    - Initiatives to showcase artists outside of PR; not enough audiences here to make a living
  - Two projects as a way of answering the pressing issues of PR
- *Kendell Henry, Virgin Islands*
  - Similar experiences of PR with hurricanes Irma and Maria back-to-back; power outages, etc. Very impactful.
  - It's not just white sand beaches, forts and other tourist images. It's important to understand the daily life of working on the Islands.
  - The Virgin Islands Council on the Arts consists of three people and they give roughly 40 programs a year. How do we do it? Blood, sweat and tears. What is not seen, what is forgotten, is how much individuals and their families give to make sure this work gets done.
  - Like PR, a significant budget cut for special projects. The team jumped into action and are getting it done, though, all the same.
  - The Virgin Islands calendar for 2025 is already out, features events such as a folklife festival. There is also a Virgin Islands and Puerto Rican friendship day (both share an Indigenous people).
  - Both Puerto Ricans and Virgin Islanders as a proud people; no need to make excuses for who we are. Appreciating the visits by organizations and the dollars spent, but there's so much to do.
  - Consider the size of the three islands. When facing disasters and loss of essentials like generators, you cannot simply drive from Florida to Georgia to get one. This means there's delays in important services, like getting power back on.

- A sense that those working on the islands can get forgotten. A huge thanks to organizations like the American Folklore Society and Mid Atlantic Arts for keeping the islands involved and present in programming, etc.
- Discussion
  - Why is support for traditional artists important in an island context? How do you describe this need?
    - Jessa: Folk and traditional arts are at the center of ICP: has to do with the colonial history. For so many years, this has necessitated a process of exploring who we are—proving ourselves, showing who we are (especially when the population has been denied the practice of their culture and arts for so many years). Personally, feels that folk arts is the purest form of arts when thinking about identity. Bilingualism so important, too—the ability to speak and communicate in Spanish.
    - Kendell: Now more than ever, having more and more grantees that apply now that they see that the work that they do has a title. Culture is the way the islanders live, there is no formal/informal bifurcation. Putting it in the arts council is a step in the right direction. From an island context, "we didn't know what we were doing, we were just doing it." Having it in the arts council does help carry it to the next level.
  - Daniel Lind from field trip earlier today: Spoke about the materials given to him by his neighbors and community members that he was shaping to represent the mangrove. Spoke about the mangrove as a special place, a concentrating place, a repairing zone of sorts, with filtration (water as protection and as barrier). In thinking about this work, with this metaphor in mind, what are the biggest challenges and successes in doing the work of folk arts administrators in an Island context?
    - Kendell: One of the major barriers is the isolation of the island itself—travel between islands has tripled in price. Getting artists from one location to the next is definitely a challenge, a financial challenge, an accessibility issue—prevents regular programs with artists across waters. Thinking about the work as interconnecting. More is not less—we need more to do more.
    - Jessa: Since the 1950s, PR has been in the fast process of industrialization with the creation of the Commonwealth of PR. ICP created to deal with the spiritual, cultural aspects of PR alongside infrastructure. Anything that resembled country/folk ways of living was deemed unattractive and something that did not lead to advancement. this has led to huge problems; PR imports more than 80% of its food, despite the ability to be able to harvest all year round. Agriculture was deemed contrary to advancement and

progress for so many years. Nowadays, that has led to a lot of problems with access to raw materials. For instance, for artists who work with vegetable fibers and leather, there's now huge problems there. Not surprising that there's a renewed attention to going back to the land, to slow food, to the folk and traditional arts among young people. The young people have always lived in economic crisis and so are looking for new ways to live and make connection with land. Jessa optimistic about this leading to opportunities over time.

- As the populations of the islands change (islanders moving to the United States, brain drain, new communities, etc.), how do you represent your culture to newcomers who have moved to the island? How, on the flipside, do you think about showcasing your culture elsewhere outside the island?
  - Kendall: A lack of engagement among new populations with the historic culture of the islands. Challenge of getting newcomers to participate in the events of the arts council (the folklife festival, parades, etc.). Newcomers do not attend these events yet have their own events, such as St. Patrick's Day parades (which the arts council is asked to attend). The strategy is to go to these events, to attend when asked, to show that the arts council wishes to engage and share in these events. The bigger picture is preserving island culture for the next generation of islanders. Interacts with this question on a daily basis, the idea of reaching crossroads and trying to forge relationships.
  - Jessa: Culture in constant evolution, constantly being appropriated, resignified, etc. Sees the term *folk* as having been established as a demeaning way to denote the "folk" as "little" people. However, sees the work we do as displacing the power, as a work of representation. For so many years, people here were ashamed of PR accent; the influence and power of key artists, etc., has shifted the power and made things like the accent desirable, has made things that have for many years been derogatorily deemed "folk" now sexy. Culture presented in new ways has made it attractive to younger generations. When we think about art and culture, we need to keep thinking about the process of re-contesting as a process embedded in culture--a resignifying of culture.

## **Sustainability for Our Field: Responding to the Needs of Communities**

### **Panel Discussion**

#### **Takeaways**

*Q: How do you advocate for your needs?*

- A: There are bureaucratic hurdles to getting what you need, such as invoices, quotes, and questions around the appropriateness of expressed needs.

- It is an asset being a fellow cultural bearer because people know to ask for what they need.
- SNEAP has a regional program that extends beyond CT.
- It is easier to advocate for health and wellness in the arts than folk and traditional arts.
  - This connects to the Tending the Taproot program
  - We need to advocate for folk and traditional arts to be included in all programs.
- Work on when to ask for help and assistance.

*Q: How do you protect yourself?*

- Keep practicing my own art.
- Surrounding yourself with your mentors.
- Doing what makes you happy.

*Q: What does career growth look like to you?*

- The moment I don't love what I'm doing I take a step back and reassess what the next step is.

#### Discussion

- Locate natural crossovers within SAAs.
- Youth programs involve family members in the work.
- Being known is a local asset, but that doesn't translate to grant writing.
- Streamlining is not always possible. Financial and bureaucratic processes can hang up checks to grantees.
- Collecting feedback from past participants.
- Make the granting and payment process and timeline clear, and manage expectations.
- Go out of your way to provide technical assistance.

## Wednesday, October 23

### **Sustainability of Knowledge across Generations and through Migration/Diaspora**

Elisha Oliver, Jeannelle Ramirez, and Mariela Freire (Texas Folklife); Sunny Saucedo (Grammy-winning Tejano accordion musician)

#### **Takeaways**

- Texas Folklife est. 1984
- Began apprenticeships program 1987
- It can feel extractive when you visit a community for a specific program but don't see them for another year.

- But it's not sustainable to be in the field yourself all the time, especially in such a big geographic area as Texas.
- Being out in community doesn't always look like being there yourself, but trusting community ambassadors to work in their communities with you
- Have to build those relationships
- Stories from Deep in the Heart Program
  - Community Folklife Fellowship Training program for adults to learn how to document their own communities
  - All learners produce podcast and blog post about their community and lead a community workshop where artists share their cultural practices
  - Training process:
    - Identify tradition
    - Map out questions
    - Seek tradition bearers
    - Document the tradition
    - Share the tradition: public media and community workshops
- Importance of representing many diverse immigrant and refugee communities in Texas, including those who may not be part of a popular conception of "Texas culture"; training program provides opportunities for this
- Sunny Saucedo shares stories about growing up in migrant farming family, learning accordion from his father
  - "We don't want watered-down. We want what's real. In order to continue the tradition, we have to focus on really how it sounds, how it feels."
  - His father documented his own and Sunny's music; didn't appreciate it until he was gone.
  - Own kids have said they aren't interested in learning accordion from him: "Why are you trying to make me be like you?"
  - Importance of being cross-generational: Blending cool, modern, nontraditional performance with traditional music form and songs
  - To entertain is to share my culture.
  - "Saturating the social media space" as an outlet for sharing tradition and connecting with young people, starting point for building relationships
- "Sustaining knowledge is not a passive endeavor. It takes intentionality." –Elisha Oliver
  - Elevating mentor artists, providing platforms for sharing across borders and generations, engaging with young people

**Thursday, October 24**

**NASAA Assembly 2024 Folk & Traditional Arts Program Managers Peer Group Session**  
([Agenda](#))

- What change do I want to be? Individuals in this session were asked to articulate the answer to this question to one another at their tables.
- Dr. Sonia BasSheva Mañjon, chief learning officer for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and former coexecutive director of LeaderSpring Center, discussed reflecting on the historical processes that shaped several long-standing BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and/or people of color) arts organizations across the United States, discussing how the contexts of creation are also the contexts of struggle.
- How do we deal with challenging funding structures? What is accomplished by stretching peanuts and showing that many individuals were funded with a small amount of money?
- Community panels
- Ask organization funders to talk to other funders on your organization's behalf and to encourage increased support.
- How can we fund folks who are not institutionalized, who are applying as individuals?
- Some of our funding structures betray a lack of trust for grantees and their understandings of their needs as well as their ability to manage funds.
- Possibility of partnering with tourism, which is less restrictive in terms of how they distribute funds
- This work can be tiring and exhausting.
- My succession plan is everywhere I go.
- The strategy is the art!
- Questions discussed during the session:
  - What are the mechanisms of policy change and partnership building?
  - Who are the trusted intermediaries in your funding contexts?
  - What about adjudication transparency?
  - Which collaborations and partnerships support your organization's succession planning?
  - Invite artists to volunteer or request access to decision-making spaces such as city council.
  - What are nonfinancial support possibilities?
  - How do we share success stories?
  - How can we use the public comment process for grant panels to voice issues and articulate needs?