

# Building Trust, Sustaining Art

Cross-Case Findings from the  
Arts Research for Communities of Color Fellowship



SSRC

Wallace 

## 8 Executive Summary

## 12 Introduction

Who the 18 organizations are and what they do

## 16 Organizations face key challenges

Trust and legitimacy in communities

Challenging dominant narratives in the arts field

Negotiating cultural excellence

Balancing local, national, and international orientations

## 26 How the organizations respond to those challenges

Strategies and practices for building legitimacy

Reframing dominant narratives and building field legitimacy

Archiving and documentation

Labor, care, and sustainability

Management and governance approaches

Collaboration, fluidity, and solidarity

Placemaking and capital investment

40	Opportunities for further research
44	Opportunities for institutional support
46	Conclusion
48	Annex
50	Suggested Readings
51	Bibliography

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# IMAGES

Dr. Martin Luther King Day at the Gantt, January 2026. Courtesy of the Harvey B. Gantt Center, ©Tyrus Ortega Gaines Photography. p. 7

A "Holiday Extravaganza" musical performance from November 2025 at The Shirley Tyree Theater at The Union for Contemporary Art, Dan Swoboda. p. 10

Wallace Foundation peer learning community in Chicago, Charles Bouril. pp. 14, 32, 33

Members of the Nuba Kush Cultural Dancers perform within the Union's recent exhibition, "Naturally Framed," by artist Assad Komi, whose work honors the rich cultural heritage of the Nuba people, Dan Swoboda. p. 18

Kwanzaa 2025 at the Gantt, December 2025. Courtesy of the Harvey B. Gantt Center, ©Tyrus Ortega Gaines Photography. p. 20

Audience members at a Chicago Sinfonietta performance, Kyle Flubacker. p. 22

2025 CC Fellows—Nic Black, Anurima Kumar, and Maleek Rae—hosting activations at Bed-Stuy summer block parties on the Quincy–Nostrand–Marcy Block with community partner GrowHouse Design + Development, as part of the project Rooted Together: Molding Our Collective Future & Celebrating Bed-Stuy. p. 23

2025 Create Change Bed-Stuy AiR Open Studio by Zakiya Collier at Gladys Books and Wine, featuring the project Collective Remembrance: For the Art of Preserving Bed-Stuy Restoration History, Kay Hickman. p. 24

Two co-op members work during a clay projects workshop at The Union for Contemporary Art, Dan Swoboda. p. 37

Alabama State student Terron Baldwin presented his work during an artist talk in December 2025, capping off his residency at The Union for Contemporary Art, Dan Swoboda. p. 39

Jeremy Okai Davis Exhibition Opening, March 2026. Courtesy of the Harvey B. Gantt Center, ©Tyrus Ortega Gaines Photography. p. 41

The cast of 'Wine in the Wilderness' performs on stage, kicking off the Union's 2026 Theater season at The Shirley Tyree Theater, Dan Swoboda. pp. 42, 43

Suggested citation: Social Science Research Council. *Building Trust, Sustaining Art: Cross-Case Findings from the Arts Research for Communities of Color Fellowship*. New York: SSRC, 2026.  
<https://doi.org/10.59656/A-A09456.001>.

# Acknowledgements

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) is grateful for the confidence our partners and funder have placed in the Arts Research for Communities of Color (ARCC) Fellowship. This report is based on the dedicated work of the ARCC Fellows and their partner organizations, who, over the course of a year, built a research collaboration grounded in a cocreated research design and continuous dialogue. Fellows uprooted their lives to be close to their organizations or traveled extensively to be present, while arts organizations in the middle of busy programming and performing seasons made space for this collaboration. That level of mutual investment is rare, and we are grateful for it.

We were thrilled when The Wallace Foundation approached the SSRC in 2021 to cocreate a research fellowship to support early-career qualitative scholars with a robust financial backing, recognizing that the best fieldwork and writing require access to resources. As our philanthropic funder, The Wallace Foundation came forward with resources and enthusiasm, and we extend our sincere thanks for putting their trust in our work and for allowing us and the ARCC Fellows to be part of the Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. We extend a big thank you to Dr. Candace Miller (Research Officer in the Arts), Dr. Bronwyn Bevan (Vice President of Research), and the Wallace editorial team for their committed engagement with our work, thoughtful feedback, and genuine investment in what the Fellows and organizations were building.

During the ARCC Fellowship, the SSRC and the Fellows received support and guidance from a group of interdisciplinary researchers and faculty in the humanities, arts, and social sciences who served as the program's Research Advisory Committee. This report is particularly indebted to one of its members, Dr. antonio c. cuyler, whose expertise in arts management and cultural policy helped shape our approach to the cross-case analysis. He read early drafts and helped lay the intellectual foundation for this report.

We also want to thank Rodrigo Ugarte for his tremendous editorial support across multiple drafts. His flexibility and vision of what would make this report useful to arts organizations shaped it in ways that show his years of experience helping academics translate their research. Finally, we thank graphic designer Six Lambda L. whose creative contributions made this report a reality.



# Executive Summary

Arts organizations rooted in communities of color operate at the intersection of artistic ambition and structural disadvantage while producing extraordinary work with significant cultural and civic value. The Arts Research for Communities of Color (ARCC) Fellowship was created to document this reality from the inside and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable arts field. To that end, this report is the culmination of this fellowship program. It synthesizes the collaborative research conducted by the ARCC Fellows with 18 participating organizations from The Wallace Foundation's Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative, identifying the recurring challenges these organizations face and the organizational practices they employ to thrive in an otherwise forbidding funding environment and an exclusionary arts field.

Established in 2021 by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) with funding from The Wallace Foundation, ARCC paired 18 early-career qualitative researchers with 18 arts organizations across the United States. The Fellows came from disciplines including sociology, anthropology, and art history. The organizations range from place-based community hubs and culturally specific performing arts companies to museums and media arts organizations. What made these pairings unusual was the commitment to producing collaborative research within organizational life, with research questions shaped by what the organizations themselves needed to understand about their work, rather than by academic agendas.

Working closely with their respective organizations, Fellows identified four recurring challenges:

***Trust is not assumed.*** In neighborhoods shaped by decades of disinvestment, redlining, and gentrification, communities have good reasons to be skeptical of institutions, including arts organizations. The 18 organizations have built trust with their serving communities through sustained presence, demonstrated responsiveness, and a willingness to be held accountable to community values and criticism over time.

***Challenging dominant narratives in the arts field demands ongoing labor.*** These organizations have to invest significant time and resources in translational and educational work to inform their funders, critics, and audiences of the importance of their work and to legitimize their position within their respective arts fields. This educational work is not peripheral to their mission; it is how they survive.

***Negotiating cultural excellence is a constant tension.*** Field-level standards have historically centered on narrow aesthetic traditions that were not built with these organizations in mind. In response, they have developed their own definitions of excellence rooted in community experience, whether by elevating devalued local forms, broadening audiences beyond elites, or asserting community-rooted practices in dominant institutional spaces.

***Balancing local, national, and international orientations requires ongoing strategic choices.*** Many organizations serve overlapping constituencies with different and sometimes competing expectations, navigating accountability to their immediate communities while participating in broader artistic and diasporic networks.



To meet these challenges, the 18 organizations have developed integrated strategies that span their artistic, organizational, and community-facing work.

### ***Building trust and legitimacy***

The organizations **build trust** in two ways: by providing unique access to resources, programming, and safe spaces for artists and communities to experiment and collaborate, and by staying attentive to their constituents' evolving needs and adjusting accordingly. They also reframe dominant narratives and build **field legitimacy** without choosing between community accountability and field recognition. They do this by investing in the professional development of their staff and artists and encouraging artistic collaboration and innovation. Some organizations go further, using their art practices to challenge biases and educate audiences about the experiences of communities of color.

### ***Archiving and cultural memory***

Through **archiving and documentation**, organizations preserve histories that dominant institutions have long overlooked, asserting the contributions of communities of color to their respective arts fields. Fellows also participated directly in this work, documenting the institution's histories and preserving archives, making research itself part of the organization's capacity to sustain their stories over time.

### ***Labor, care, and governance***

Persistent underfunding and structural precarity have shaped how these organizations manage their internal work. Many started their work relying on ***labor*** dynamics shaped by charity-based organizational models and an emphasis on sacrifice. These dynamics generate conflict across generations and genders, contributing to burnout. Some organizations have responded to these labor challenges by developing care-based policies that invest in staff sustainability and well-being. ***Governance*** raises a related set of tensions: As organizations have grown, they have had to move away from the informal structures of their early years and experiment with new management approaches, balancing staff expectations and remaining accountable to their communities. Neither labor nor governance has a clean solution. What Fellows document across these cases is ongoing negotiation rather than resolution.

### ***Collaboration and placemaking***

The 18 organizations treat ***collaboration*** as a core value. They build interdependence within their organizations, across peer institutions, and across broader movement alliances. Role fluidity, shared resources, and movement solidarity allow these organizations to do collectively what none of them could sustain on their own. ***Placemaking*** is equally central to how organizations sustain their work over time. For them, securing and defending physical space is a condition of survival that signals commitment to their communities while also serving as a foundation for the long-term cultural presence their missions require.

The ARCC cases point to organizations doing extraordinary work under conditions that most institutions would not survive. They also point to the need for further research to better understand how these organizations sustain themselves over time. More longitudinal research on how trust gets built and rebuilt over time, how excellence is defined and contested across generations and arts disciplines, and how collective capacity emerges across networks would deepen the field's understanding. In addition, the Fellows' research makes the case for increased institutional support that would allow these organizations to remain accountable to their communities' changing needs. Much of what makes their work possible—relationship maintenance, care, education, and coalition building—remains invisible within conventional funding frameworks. Philanthropic support that recognizes this labor as foundational and allows for organizations to adapt over time to stay accountable to community-defined values, rather than field visibility, would contribute to a more equitable and sustainable arts field.

# Introduction

The Arts Research for Communities of Color (ARCC) Fellowship was established in 2021 by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), in partnership with The Wallace Foundation, to support research on arts organizations rooted in communities of color in the United States. Wallace created the fellowship in the hopes of using social science research to contribute to a more equitable and sustainable arts field through empirical evidence, theory building, and careful analysis of organizational practice.

ARCC is part of The Wallace Foundation's Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative, which supports arts organizations working in communities of color as they strengthen their organizational health and long-term sustainability. As part of this effort, the SSRC matched 18 early-career research Fellows with the 18 participating organizations with annual budgets of \$500,000 or more. The Fellows were to document elements of their organizations' histories or practices that were important to them. This work could then serve as a resource for the organizations while also contributing to research literature related to the arts. Over the course of a year, Fellows conducted collaborative research with their partner organizations, followed by six months dedicated to producing a case study and a tailored research-informed deliverable for organizational use.

ARCC included two cohorts: eleven Fellows who began in 2022 and seven who began in 2023. Fellows represented disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and art history. Most Fellows held faculty appointments at colleges or universities. The SSRC provided funding, mentoring, regular convenings, and opportunities for Fellows across both cohorts to learn from each other's work.

This report draws on the Fellows' research to identify patterns across cases. It examines recurring challenges, strategies, and organizational practices, offering a field-level picture of how arts organizations rooted in communities of color navigate trust, artistic value, labor, governance, and place-based commitments in a shifting cultural and funding landscape.

## Who the 18 organizations are and what they do

The 18 organizations participating in the ARCC Fellowship represent a diverse set of arts organizations rooted in communities of color working across artistic disciplines, geographies, and organizational models. While they differ in size, history, and scope, they share a commitment to advancing artistic practice while serving communities that have been historically marginalized within the US arts ecosystem. They illustrate the different ways arts organizations contribute to cultural vitality, community connection, and creative life.

Across this group, organizations play distinct yet overlapping roles in their communities and artistic fields. Some operate as **place-based community hubs**, using art as a vehicle for neighborhood engagement, cultural organizing, and collective care. They are situated in specific local contexts and respond directly to the effects of disinvestment, displacement, and

exclusion by providing accessible spaces for gathering, learning, and creative expression. In these settings, the arts function as part of community infrastructure rather than as a separate or rarefied activity.

Others focus on ***developing and presenting culturally specific performing arts*** while participating in national and international artistic networks. These organizations sustain artistic traditions rooted in diasporic or culturally specific histories while contributing to broader conversations within their fields through touring, collaboration, and innovation. Moving between local audiences and transnational contexts shapes both their aesthetic choices and how they operate.

A third group centers on ***preserving and activating community histories*** through exhibitions, archives, and cultural programming. They safeguard artistic and cultural records that dominant institutions have often excluded, while reimagining archives as living resources that support education, intergenerational exchange, and community identity.

Finally, some organizations emphasize ***media making and storytelling***, creating platforms for voices that are frequently marginalized within both cultural and media industries. They expand representation, challenge dominant portrayals, and support new forms of cultural production through film, digital media, and narrative work.



# THE 18 ORGANIZATIONS

## **Place-based community hubs**

The Laundromat Project (Brooklyn, NY)  
Esperanza Peace and Justice Center (San Antonio, TX)  
Pillsbury House + Theatre (Minneapolis, MN)  
Oakland Collective (Oakland, CA)  
1Hood Media Academy (Pittsburgh, PA)

## **Culturally specific performing arts organizations with national and international reach**

Ragamala Dance Company (Minneapolis, MN)  
Theater Mu (Saint Paul, MN)  
Chicago Sinfonietta (Chicago, IL)  
Philadelphia Dance Company (Philadelphia, PA)  
Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater (New York, NY)

## **Organizations centered on community history, archives, and cultural memory**

Arab American National Museum (Dearborn, MI)  
Rebuild Foundation (Chicago, IL)  
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (San Juan, PR)  
Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture (Charlotte, NC).

## **Media-making and storytelling organizations**

Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (San Francisco, CA)  
BlackStar (Philadelphia, PA)  
Self Help Graphics & Art (Los Angeles, CA)  
The Union for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE)

<sup>1</sup> A complete list of participating organizations, their locations, and associated Fellows is provided in the Annex.

**Organizations  
face key  
challenges**

The 18 organizations share commitments to cultural specificity, community accountability, and artistic innovation. However, to meet these, they have to confront a set of challenges shaped by historical inequities, field-level norms, and competing expectations from communities, funders, and artistic institutions. The sections below summarize recurring tensions the Fellows identified in their research and how they respond to these pressures with strategies that strengthen community accountability, expand artistic possibility, and build field legitimacy.

## Trust and legitimacy in communities

Trust and legitimacy are persistent challenges for arts organizations rooted in communities of color working in contexts shaped by disinvestment and skepticism toward institutions. Many of them operate in neighborhoods where cultural institutions have been absent, extractive, or short lived, which contributes to long-standing distrust of institutions. In these contexts, trust is not assumed. They build it through sustained presence and practices that change with community needs and external pressures.



Fellows describe how the organizations have stepped in to fill gaps left by governments and larger institutions. This work does not automatically overcome distrust. Histories of redlining, gentrification, and exclusionary development have made many communities skeptical of development efforts, regardless of who leads them. In some cases, that skepticism extends to arts organizations, especially when community members see the leaders as outsiders.



This history of disinvestment has created uncertainty and suspicion, complicating the work of the 18 organizations. Based on work with The Union for Contemporary Art (The Union), Jason White identifies three primary barriers to building trust within communities of color shaped by redlining: (a) distrust of outsider-led nonprofits, (b) concern that arts nonprofits divert resources from urgent needs, and (c) a general distrust of community outsiders. This social landscape lies largely beyond the organizations' control and requires ongoing trust building with the communities they serve.



As a result, trust building necessitates renegotiating expectations and shared values over time and according to community stakeholders. Fellows show that the organizations serve diverse populations, including groups with varying expectations, such as artists, audiences, and neighboring communities. The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture (The Gantt), for example, was established in response to the effects of urban renewal and Black displacement. Founder Mary Harper sought to create a space to preserve local Black history and culture. However, more recently, when The Gantt tried to engage directly with the community, local artists expressed skepticism about its outreach. This skepticism reflected a sense that The Gantt had for too long prioritized national fine arts programming over supporting regional Black artists, leaving many local creatives feeling overlooked. Following her research at The Gantt, Monica Barra finds that local artists did not trust the shift. They had seen too little investment in their work to take the organization's new community orientation at face value.

## Challenging dominant narratives in the arts field

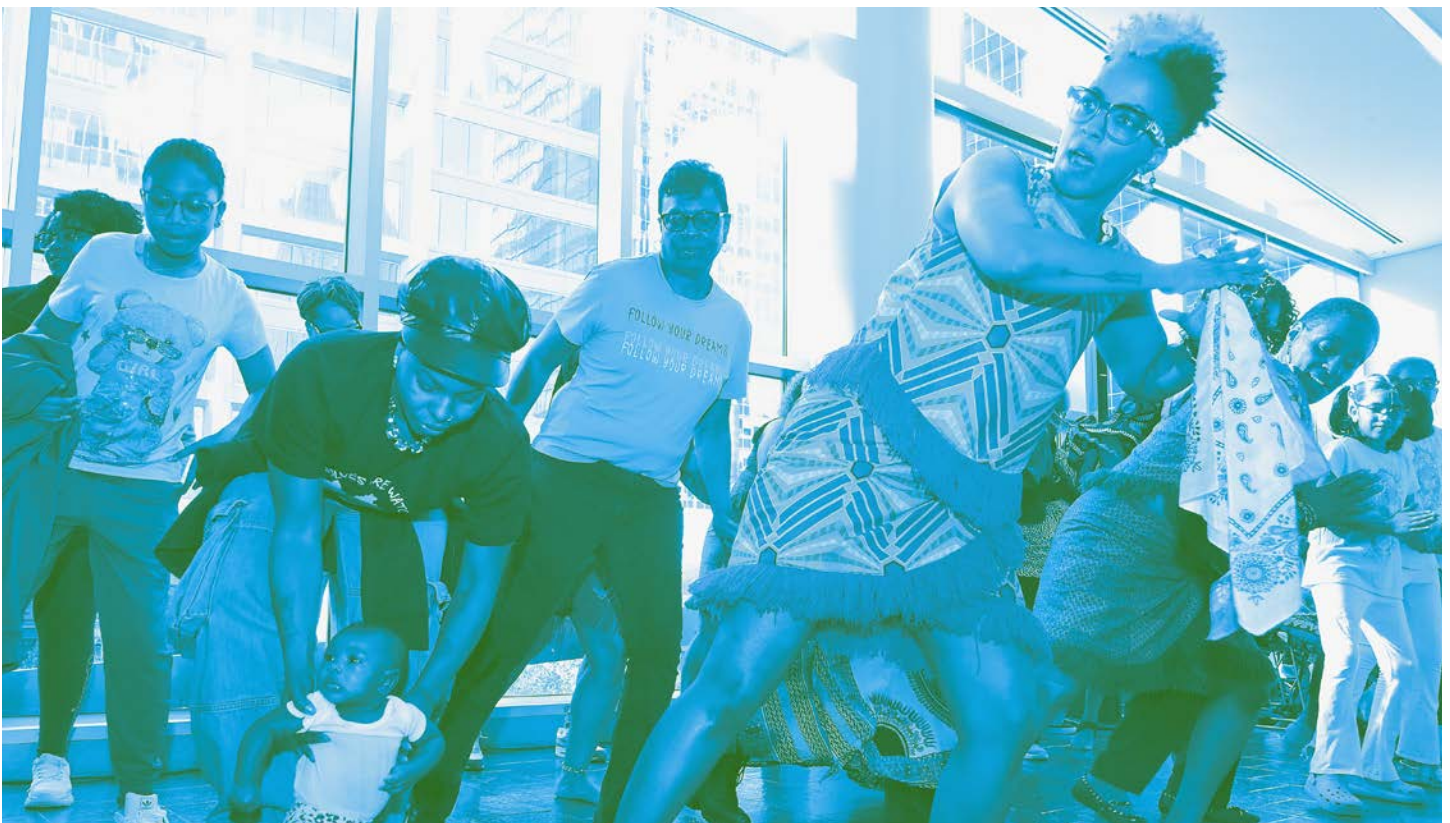
Arts organizations rooted in communities of color operate within an arts ecosystem that often undervalues their work or mischaracterizes it through narrow or deficit-based frames. Fellows document how they must contend with assumptions that position community-centered art as secondary to “professional” artistic practice. These narratives can influence how funders, peers, and audiences perceive them, with direct implications for legitimacy and continued access to resources.

Fellows document that challenging dominant narratives requires reframing how artistic value is defined and expanding who gets to define it. The organizations regularly engage in translational and educational labor to explain the cultural, artistic, and social value of their work. This labor extends beyond audience development to include funders, critics, and field-level institutions that may lack frameworks for understanding art rooted in diasporic histories, racialized experience, or community accountability.

In many cases, organizations must challenge the definitions of artistic excellence in their respective creative fields. They do so, for example, by elevating community-oriented work, which is often seen as a lower form or less sophisticated art. The work of Ragamala Dance Company and Theater Mu in Minneapolis and St. Paul, respectively, exemplifies the tension between uplifting Asian artistic expression and being recognized as key players in the broader fields of dance and theater. kt shorb, the fellow researching Theater Mu, shows in their work how BIPOC-led theater companies tend to be dismissed as “community theater,” a label that carries real consequences for funding and legitimacy. Ying Diao finds a similar dynamic at Ragamala, where the organization's work is received as traditional or ethnic rather than as the contemporary artistic practice it is.

Mainstream arts institutions are not the only ones that can sometimes overlook the complexities of intersecting forms of marginalization. Funders and nonspecialized audiences also need to be educated on the value of community arts. For example, one of the goals of Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCCMAP) is to change the representation of queer people in film and to capture its nuance. However, as Silvia Rodriguez Vega notes from her research with QWOCCMAP, it needs to educate funders on the importance of its work, especially in a high-cost field like film. QWOCCMAP has had to engage funders in ongoing education around the intersectional experiences of queer communities of color and the underrecognized contributions of women and nonbinary individuals in film. As Rodriguez Vega finds, QWOCCMAP has to fight funders' inclination to see it as a niche within a niche, educating them on the legacy of women and nonbinary individuals in film technology. Similarly, Raquel Jimenez notes how the artistic directors of Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater (PRTT) see their work as focused on educating audiences and challenging preconceptions about immigrant communities of color. For Pregones/PRTT, developing characters who break stereotypes and challenge traditional ideas of Puerto Rican identity is key.

Beyond serving their cultural and local communities, organizations are also expanding how their respective art fields and funders view artistic expression. They challenge and educate, reshaping how community-oriented, culturally diverse art forms can innovate within their respective art fields. Funders and other allies, like audiences, while well-meaning, may also need instruction on the importance of their work, especially in highlighting the ways intersecting forms of marginalization and diversity are often overlooked.



## Negotiating cultural excellence

The 18 organizations must also navigate competing and conflicting understandings of cultural excellence. These tensions emerge at the intersection of community expectations, artistic traditions, funder priorities, and field-level standards that have historically centered narrow aesthetic traditions.

In this report, “excellence” or “cultural excellence” refers to forms of artistic and cultural expression that are recognized as meaningful, rigorous, and valuable by the communities they emerge from. Fellows’ research shows that excellence is not a fixed or universally shared concept across organizations, but one that institutions continually negotiate with their communities and external stakeholders. The notions of excellence that helped them establish legitimacy early on have become more complicated over time, as the pressure to meet art-field standards pulls against keeping accountable to the communities they serve.

How organizations negotiate cultural excellence depends on their community and their art form. There is no single approach, and the tension between field-level standards and community-defined values plays out differently in each case. As Jimenez shows, Pregones/PRTT works within and outside a system of theater cultural excellence, forging ties with the mainstream arts establishment while promoting plays rooted in diverse Puerto Rican postcolonial immigrant stories. Pregones/PRTT productions have to resonate emotionally and culturally with Puerto Rican diaspora audiences

while also meeting the standards of mainstream critics and funders who may lack the cultural framework to fully appreciate them. Operating venues in both the South Bronx and Manhattan’s Theater District, Pregones/PRTT navigates these two worlds, crafting work that is neither diluted for mainstream acceptance nor inaccessible to broader audiences.

Organizations serving Black communities have developed distinct approaches to excellence, and three of them illustrate how that negotiation can unfold differently. Chicago Sinfonietta, The Gantt, and the Rebuild Foundation each offer distinct examples of how they integrate this concept into their programming and articulate it in relation to their funding strategies. Both Sinfonietta and The Gantt have been renegotiating the question of elite aesthetics throughout their history. As Timnet Gedar’s work with the Sinfonietta shows, the institution’s founding mission was an attempt to redefine excellence in classical music, questioning what counted as serious classical music. Its founder, Paul Freeman, challenged the Eurocentric canon by building the orchestra around music by Black composers. In its early development, the Sinfonietta also benefited from cultural capital and support offered by Black elites, who provided financial and reputational support through fiscal sponsorship, hosting benefit galas, and attending concerts. Sinfonietta’s founder actively sought to expand the orchestra’s audience by promoting leadership and participant diversity to speak not only to elites. However, Gedar finds that today Sinfonietta has expanded its audience diversity across most demographic markers, except for class.

Similarly, Barra examines how The Gantt addresses questions of Black excellence in two contexts: Charlotte's Black communities and contemporary national Black art. At its inception in 1974, The Gantt's mission was to serve as a repository for local African American history and culture, shaped by the Black Power and Black Arts movements and their emphasis on community rootedness and local cultural preservation. That local accountability remains very much alive today: Longtime patrons and community elders continue to hold The Gantt to its founding mission, expecting it to center Black Charlotte's history and culture. At the same time, a younger generation of Black artists and audiences identifies with a broader global Black diasporic identity that extends beyond the local. While balancing local priorities and participating in global Black culture, national funders

pressure The Gantt to demonstrate its relevance to the broader arts ecosystem. The Gantt thus is in a tension between the demand to remain accountable to its founding local mission and the pressure to expand its vision outward toward national and diasporic contexts.

In contrast, Nazanin Gaffari, the fellow working with Rebuild, finds that its approach differs from that of The Gantt and Sinfonietta in promoting a view of Black excellence that elevates South Side Chicago's Black culture. The organization is committed to elevating buildings, art, and cultural experiences that have historically been devalued, reclassifying them as part of Black excellence. Rebuild has done this by, for example, purchasing a neighborhood building, now known as the Stony Island Arts Bank, preserving its aesthetic, and keeping it as an archival object and as a





site to house defunct Black publications. By institutionalizing spaces and celebrating Black art on a grander scale, Rebuild makes the case that excellence was already there, rooted in the South Side, waiting to be recognized on its own terms.

Other of the 18 institutions also grapple with decentering elite aesthetics while developing their own definitions of excellence. As Asif Majid suggests, the Arab American National Museum (AANM), which opened in 2005, approaches excellence through an immigrant lens. In its early years, the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), the museum's parent organization, emphasized permanence and respectability in response to post-9/11 surveillance and marginalization. That emphasis continues today, which Majid interprets as an effort to anchor Arab Americanness against narratives of transience.

Davinia Gregory-Kameka's research at BlackStar, a Philadelphia-based film arts organization that runs an annual film festival, exhibitions, and filmmaker development programs, shows how the negotiation of excellence takes shape in the film world. In this field, organizational credibility is tied to competition for premieres and industry recognition. Gregory-Kameka documents how BlackStar has invested heavily in branding and curatorial excellence to assert its place in the field. Yet staff describe ongoing frustration with having to compete with larger, better-resourced mainstream film festivals for premieres and filmmaker loyalty, with filmmakers sometimes choosing Sundance or South by Southwest even after being nurtured by BlackStar. For the organization, negotiating excellence means simultaneously building credibility within the film industry and remaining accountable to the Black and diasporic filmmaking communities that its mission centers on.

Cultural excellence remains a dynamic and contested concept for the organizations, transcending the communities they serve and their art practices. How they view excellence has shaped how they present themselves to funders, allies, and audiences, as well as to their respective art fields at large, but each has taken a different approach to defining and challenging excellence. Each institution has taken a different path, including elevating devalued local forms, broadening audiences beyond elites, or pushing community-rooted practices into institutional spaces that were not built for them.

Cultural excellence remains a dynamic and contested concept for the organizations, transcending the communities they serve and their art practices.



## Balancing local, national, and international orientations

Arts organizations rooted in communities of color rarely operate within a single, bounded notion of community. Fellows show how they navigate multiple and overlapping constituencies, balancing deep commitments to place-based communities with relationships to national and international artistic and diasporic networks. These orientations are not mutually exclusive, nor do they follow a linear progression from local to global. Instead, organizations make strategic choices about where and how to situate their work in response to artistic traditions, community accountability, and resource constraints.

Fellows' analyses highlight how organizations actively negotiate the benefits and tensions of different orientations. For some, a local focus enables responsiveness to immediate community needs, as seen in The Laundromat Project (The LP), Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, and Pillsbury House + Theatre (PH+T), each of which centers its work in the specific communities and neighborhoods it serves. Others, like Theater Mu, Ragamala, and AANM, live between local commitments and national or international diasporic networks, using that range to strengthen their practice and build credibility in their respective fields.

For organizations working with immigration, diaspora, and pan-identities, international engagement is not just useful, it shapes the art itself. At Ragamala, the ability to move between local and international contexts runs through both its aesthetic and organizational practice. Bharatanatyam is traditionally a solo form, but as Diao notes, Ragamala's ensemble-based approach, built around variation rather than unison, reflects years of exchange with dance traditions from other cultures. That dialogue makes the work distinctly theirs.

The case of AANM illustrates a different set of tensions embedded in international orientation. As Majid explains, AANM navigates relationships among immigrant Arabness, Arab Americanness, and diasporic Arabness in shaping its imagined community. While the museum situates itself within a broader Arab diaspora, its parent organization, ACCESS, maintains a more localized focus rooted in immigrant identity in Dearborn (Michigan). Those two orientations pull in different directions, and the museum has to hold both, balancing diasporic affiliation with the institutional and community contexts in which it operates. That positioning also connects AANM to national and international networks in ways a local focus would not.

These cases challenge the assumption that community is defined solely by geographic proximity. Across the cases, Fellows found that many organizations actively negotiate relationships among local, regional, and international contexts, balancing responsiveness to place-based needs with engagement in broader artistic and cultural networks.

**How the  
organizations  
respond  
to those  
challenges**

The sections below show how the 18 organizations respond to these pressures through practices that combine relationship building, artistic strategy, education, and organizational capacity. Their strategies are shaped by local context, organizational history, and artistic form, yet certain patterns are consistent across cases. They all engaged in building legitimacy through sustained community presence, archiving and memory work, navigating labor and care, and securing physical and relational infrastructure. These practices allow organizations to remain responsive and stay accountable to their core values, while adapting to shifting community needs and funding.

## Strategies and practices for building legitimacy

Fellows describe trust building as an ongoing practice that requires consistency, openness to critique, and the capacity to adapt institutional practices to the community's feedback. They identify two trust-building strategies that appear consistently across organizations. The first is providing access to resources, programming, and spaces that would otherwise not exist. Self Help Graphics & Art in East Los Angeles, located in a neighborhood long shaped by racialized urban planning and limited arts infrastructure, is one of the few no-cost cultural spaces available to residents. J.V. Decemvirale documents how it also curates exhibitions across Los Angeles, bringing programming into communities where access remains uneven.

Similarly, in Puerto Rico, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico's (MAC) program MAC en el Barrio extends beyond the museum's walls to engage artists and audiences in their everyday environments. As Claudia Sofía Garriga-López shows based on her research at MAC PR, this work challenges classed and racialized divides between institutional art and popular creative expression while reviving cultural traditions embedded in densely developed urban spaces.

Alongside access, belonging matters. Several organizations are spaces where artists can experiment and take risks without having to justify their identities or cultural references so trust shows up in who feels welcomed and whether people experience the organization as accountable to their lives. At Theater Mu, shorb finds that actors and playwrights described the organization as an extended artistic family that supports experimentation and offers distance from stereotypical representations of Asian identity. Similarly, at QWOCMAP, Rodriguez Vega found that participants valued the technical resources, but what they kept coming back to was the encouragement, the care, and the sense that they could just be there without having to fight for their place.

A second trust-building strategy centers on developing programming that responds directly to the communities' evolving priorities. As Gedar notes, the Sinfonietta has worked to expand the accessibility and diversity of orchestral audiences by centering the Black community and collaborating with artists outside classical music, drawing on the vision of Paul Freeman, whose own experiences of exclusion shaped the organization from the start. Barra shows how The Gantt deepened trust with North Carolina artists after introducing retreats and residencies in response to what the artistic community said it needed. Artists interpreted these shifts as evidence of the institution's commitment to supporting regional artistic careers, strengthening trust in the organization.

## Alongside access, belonging matters.

## Reframing dominant narratives and building field legitimacy

Beyond serving their cultural and local communities, the 18 organizations are also challenging normative narratives that position community-centered art as secondary to “professional” artistic practices. Through translational and educational labor, they reframe how community-oriented and culturally diverse art forms can innovate within their different art fields. Audiences, funders, critics, and institutional gatekeepers are the focus of this educational labor. The strategies for validating organizations’ work require not only asserting the value of community-centered work, but also intervening in how artistic value is defined.

Fellows identify two related strategies for building field legitimacy while remaining accountable to their communities. The first involves investing in professionalization and fair pay. As shorb shows, Theater Mu provides competitive compensation, time for artistic development, and institutional support for actors and playwrights, which enables them to sustain their artistic work. Those investments challenge assumptions that culturally specific theater is informal or amateur, making Theater Mu a professional peer within the broader theater field.

A second strategy centers on artistic collaboration and formal innovation that bridges tradition and contemporary practices. Ragamala exemplifies this approach through its interdisciplinary experimentation, expanding how classical Indian dance is understood within the global performance context. As Diao documents, Ragamala incorporates new musical influences, ensemble structures, and cross-

cultural references that resist static or purely traditional framings of Bharatanatyam. In doing so, the organization challenges the tendency to categorize culturally specific art forms as “ethnic” or historical rather than dynamic and contemporary.

Beyond emphasizing the importance of community-centered arts, some organizations challenge prevailing social narratives and biases by using their art practices as pedagogical tools. They introduce audiences to counternarratives about the histories and experiences of communities of color. Fellows document how exhibitions, performances, and storytelling invite audiences to engage with histories of migration, resistance, and cultural survival that are absent from dominant narratives.

Esperanza Peace and Justice Center offers one example of how education, art, and activism are intertwined. As siri gurudev hernández, the research fellow working with Esperanza, shows, it treats artistic expression as a form of political education, using visual art, performance, and cultural events to communicate messages that extend beyond rational argument alone. Esperanza carries these practices across different community needs, including integrating art into public demonstrations and staging performances in advance of court appearances. Similarly, Jimenez’s work with Pregones/PRTT notes how theater and storytelling serve as entry points for audiences to connect emotionally with complex histories. By developing characters that feel recognizable and trustworthy, Pregones/PRTT enables audiences to engage with Puerto Rican diaspora narratives in ways that make history tangible and immediate.

The organizations do not choose between community accountability and field recognition. They build practices that hold both, and in doing so challenge dominant narratives about whose art matters, on what terms, and who gets to say.

## Archiving and documentation

To respond to the historical erasure of marginalized communities from archives, the 18 organizations use archiving and documentation as strategies to preserve cultural memory, strengthen organizational capacity, and assert the value of their histories within the broader arts ecosystem. Fellows show that archival work is not only about safeguarding the past, but also about shaping how communities are recognized and resourced in the present.

For many of the 18 organizations, archival practice serves both community-facing and internal purposes. Traditionally, archives have been defined narrowly as textual records housed by formal institutions and have tended to privilege the histories of dominant groups. In contrast, they actively expand what counts as an archive by collecting oral histories, documenting artistic processes, preserving buildings and spaces, and creating new records that reflect community experience. In many cases, Fellows themselves participated directly in archival creation, organization, or transfer, underscoring how research and documentation function as part of organizational life. Fellows describe two types of archival work: organizations preserving community histories for public engagement, and Fellows strengthening internal documentation that supports continuity and future storytelling.

Several organizations approach archiving to preserve cultural memory in fields where mainstream institutions have historically been exclusionary. Rodriguez Vega's research shows how QWOCMAP houses a significant archive of queer films made by women of color, preserving stories that mainstream film institutions often disregard and expanding the historical record of cinema. Gregory-Kameka's research at BlackStar points to how the organization's annual film festival, its journal *Seen*, and its exhibition programming together constitute a record of Black and diasporic cinema built through sustained curatorial investment in work that larger film institutions overlook. Each festival cycle adds to a living archive of who gets platformed, whose stories circulate, and which creative voices are recognized as part of the field's history.

At MAC PR, the *en el Barrio* program takes a different approach, involving community participation in archival work. As Garriga-López documents, the program brings artists and community members in collaborative projects that focus on recovering the cultural and geographic memories of neighborhoods shaped by gentrification and colonial displacement. In the Citizen Reporters project, youth from the historically Black municipality of Loíza conducted oral history interviews with community elders, produced original artwork, and created a documentary film, generating new archives from within the community and not only about it. As Garriga-López shows, this model positions archival work as a form of intergenerational bond building, in which the act of preserving history strengthens the relationships and identities it documents.

Rebuild in Chicago takes a different approach to what an archive can be. Gaffari finds that through the artistic practice of its founder, Theaster Gates, the institution elevates buildings, everyday objects, and social gatherings as repositories of cultural meaning. Rebuild institutionalized spaces and materials that have been historically devalued, reframing them as central to Black cultural history and collective memory. The Stony Island Arts Bank, a restored neighborhood building that serves as an archive, performance space, and community meeting place, is a clear example. Gaffari finds that this model invites audiences to engage actively with archival materials, bringing them to life.

**By treating archives as active, evolving resources rather than static repositories, the organizations build an inclusive cultural record that strengthens their capacity to sustain their artistic and community-centered work over time.**

Archival work also shows up in how Fellows contributed to the organization's capacity. Several Fellows helped their institutions systematize, expand, or relocate their archives to support their long-term capacity. Decemvirale, for example, created a podcast documenting the history of Self Help through interviews with founders, long-term staff, and newer generations of cultural workers, creating an accessible entry point into the organization's legacy. gurudev hernández produced videos documenting the history of Esperanza, focusing on its solidarity work across movements and communities, including LGBTQ+ advocacy and immigrant organizing in San Antonio. Both examples of memory narration serve practical purposes beyond documentation, useful for onboarding staff, engaging funders, and communicating what the organizations stand for.

In one case, archival work became a path to field recognition. Diao facilitated the transfer of Ragamala's records to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, positioning the organization's history within a broader institutional narrative of dance in the United States. This move not only safeguards Ragamala's legacy but also asserts its place within national and international artistic lineages that have not always included culturally specific forms of dance.

The cases document how organizations use archiving and documentation to expand historical representation and support community engagement. By treating archives as active, evolving resources rather than static repositories, the organizations build an inclusive cultural record that strengthens their capacity to sustain their artistic and community-centered work over time.

## Labor, care, and sustainability

To sustain their missions amid underfunding and structural precarity, the 18 organizations continually negotiate tensions around labor, care, and organizational sustainability. Fellows' research shows that these challenges are not the result of individual organizational shortcomings, but of broader funding structures, sector norms, and historical expectations placed on community-rooted cultural work.

The organizations face persistent pressures related to overwork and understaffing. These pressures reflect conditions across the US arts funding landscape, including shifting funder priorities and limited access to unrestricted operating funds. They are expected to deliver impactful programming and secure future funding without the corresponding investment in staffing and infrastructure.

Fellows' analyses highlight how romanticized narratives of community service, sacrifice, and activist labor inside organizations can reinforce these structural constraints. Many organizations were founded by individuals who relied on unpaid or underpaid work and deep personal commitment to sustain their missions. While these approaches were often necessary for survival in their early stages, the values concerning labor have persisted even as organizations have grown. As a result, expectations of flexibility, emotional investment, and self-sacrifice remain embedded in the organization's culture.

Decemvirale's research at Self Help illustrates how labor practices rooted in charity-based models shaped long-term labor dynamics. While unpaid labor has



largely disappeared, low wages and the expectation of overwork remain normalized, with community service sometimes framed as compensation. As Self Help expanded, these expectations became difficult to sustain.

Generational differences further complicate labor dynamics. Fellows document how younger staff are less willing to accept narratives of sacrifice and more likely to seek clear roles, boundaries, and sustainable working conditions. At both Self Help and Esperanza, younger staff expressed concern about burnout and turnover, particularly when commitments to care and well-being were articulated rhetorically but not supported through change. In contrast, longer-tenured staff more often normalized long hours and low compensation as inherent to community-centered work.

Gendered expectations also have an impact on labor. Barra's research at The Gantt shows how women disproportionately perform front-facing and relational labor such as community engagement and emotional mediation, while male-identifying staff more often hold behind-the-scenes



roles. This front-of-house labor requires more emotional work and time, yet is frequently framed as care or service rather than recognized as skilled labor. As Barra notes, staff internalized the expectation that “extra labor, care, and love are implicit in the job,” contributing to exhaustion and uneven workloads.

At the same time, Jaleesa Wells cautions against interpreting care-based labor solely as a liability. Her research with the Oakland Collective emphasizes the role of Black women as long-standing stewards of cultural resilience, whose leadership practices center on care, accountability, and community continuity. At the Oakland Collective, care functions not only as labor but as a source of organizational strength, enabling collaboration, responsiveness, and long-term community trust. The challenge lies in sustaining these practices without reproducing conditions of burnout or exploitation.

BlackStar offers a further example of an organization embedding care into its institutional structure. As Gregory-Kameka documents, BlackStar has formalized its

commitment to staff well-being through supplemental health benefits, professional development support, and an annual three-week hiatus following its film festival, allowing staff to recover after intensive programming. Gregory-Kameka finds that these practices have strengthened employee loyalty and retention, suggesting that intentional investment in labor conditions can support organizational sustainability without sacrificing the mission.

Labor tensions also extend beyond organizational settings into personal and family life. Diao’s study of Ragamala highlights the extensive, invisible labor undertaken by founder and principal dancer Raneé Ramaswamy to balance her leadership position with her family life. For over a decade, Ramaswamy prepared months’ worth of meals for her husband before traveling to India with her daughters to study classical Indian dance. Despite international recognition and touring demands, cultural and familial expectations shaped how artistic labor could be pursued, underscoring how sustainability is mediated by gendered norms both inside and outside organizational contexts.

Several of the organizations are beginning to confront these challenges directly. Decemvirale documents how the director of Self Help publicly named overwork as a factor in her departure and devoted her final months to addressing what she described as a “culture of exhaustion.” These moments of internal reflection signal a growing recognition that sustaining community-centered arts work requires mission alignment along with intentional investment in labor conditions and organizational health.

## Management and governance approaches

As the 18 organizations grow and their work becomes more complex, they face increasing pressure to adapt their management and governance structures. Fellows show that these adaptations are formed by a central tension: how to maintain community-rooted values and relational practices while developing systems that support organizational scale, accountability, and sustainability. In their research, they document how many organizations were founded with informal structures built around flexibility, shared responsibility, and close relationships with the community. As programming, staffing, and funding portfolios grew, those structures became harder to sustain.

Leadership teams grapple with the limits of both community-oriented and corporate management models. In some cases, leaders with corporate or nonprofit managerial experience introduced more formal systems to address increasing workloads and reporting requirements. At The Gantt, Barra observes that corporate-informed leadership contributed to financial growth, but they created new problems around internal communication and the day-to-day experience of care as an organizational value. Staff experienced tension between stated commitments to community and the day-to-day realities of hierarchical decision-making. Similarly, Decemvirale identifies how adopting more centralized management practices clashed with the organization's community-centered ethos. As workloads increased at Self Help, managerial decisions aimed at efficiency sometimes led staff to take on responsibilities beyond their roles, causing frustration. These cases

illustrate how governance shifts intended to stabilize organizations can unintentionally cause distrust if they do not align with the institution's values.

At the same time, Fellows caution against romanticizing informality as inherently equitable. gurudev hernández's work at Esperanza shows how intentionally distancing from corporate models can create its own challenges. While Esperanza's flexible, nonhierarchical approach supported its early work and movement-based commitments, the lack of clearly defined roles and decision-making structures became more difficult to sustain as staff numbers grew. For example, the founders' deep personal ties to the organization influence the expectation that staff would integrate their professional and personal lives and ambiguity around responsibilities sometimes led to miscommunication and effort duplication.

Governance challenges are tied to growth, not mission drift. Fellows document how organizations selectively move between formal and informal systems, adopting structures for budgeting, reporting, or staffing where needed while protecting participatory decision-making in other areas. The choice is rarely between corporate and community models, it is about which elements of each serve the work at a given moment. External pressures further complicate this, as funder expectations around accountability, compliance, and performance metrics push organizations toward formalization that does not always align with how they operate.

What Fellows document across these cases is an ongoing negotiation between the values that founded these organizations and the systems required to sustain them. They continue to negotiate how to balance efficiency, transparency, and care while remaining responsive to their communities. Their experiences highlight the need for governance models that recognize relational labor, support staff well-being, and allow them to grow without abandoning the values that anchor their work.

**The choice is rarely between corporate and community models, it is about which elements of each serve the work at a given moment.**

### **Collaboration, fluidity, and solidarity**

The 18 organizations rely on collaboration, role fluidity, and solidarity as intentional strategies for sustaining their work. They do not operate in isolation or competition; they build capacity by cultivating interdependence across individuals, organizations, and movements. Fellows' research shows that this work unfolds across three interconnected scales: within organizations, between them, and across broader coalitions and movements. Organizations often move across these scales fluidly. While such fluidity can introduce challenges around clarity and workload, they leverage it to strengthen artistic practice, deepen relationships, and expand their collective reach.

Within organizations, role fluidity allows staff and artists to move across administrative, creative, and community-facing functions. At Ragamala, Diao finds that administrative labor is not separated from artistic practice but understood as part of it. Dancers who also hold administrative responsibilities develop a holistic understanding of the organization, enabling them to make informed and creative decisions, particularly in resource-constrained contexts such as touring. Similarly, Jason Price observes that at Pillsbury House + Theatre (PH+T), artists are encouraged to participate across multiple projects and collaborations, fostering adaptability, shared ownership, and a deeper sense of connection to both the organization and the surrounding community.

Collaboration also spans organizations, enabling them to share resources, knowledge, and artistic opportunities. Fellows show that many view their work as contributing to a shared cultural project and do not adopt competitive postures. As Decemvirale documents, Self Help exemplifies this orientation through its role as a free training space and site of alternative pedagogy for community-based arts practice. Artists and cultural workers trained there have gone on to lead similar programs across Los Angeles County for decades, and Self Help's master printer has extended the model internationally, helping establish

print studios in other community arts spaces. For Decemvirale, Self Help functions less as a single institution than as a source of knowledge and practice that circulates through a broader ecosystem of community-rooted cultural work.

Wells's research on the Oakland Collective illustrates how decentralized, collaborative models can strengthen community capacity. By allowing autonomous organizations to share resources while maintaining distinct identities, the Collective exemplifies how learning can occur across institutions and not only within them. Composed of three distinct organizations, each led by Black women, the Collective draws on intergenerational legacies and shared histories to build what Wells terms "conjured collectiveness." Through joint programming, shared space, and collaborative leadership, the Collective amplifies each organization's capacity while preserving autonomy.

Cross-organizational collaboration is also evident among arts organizations in the Twin Cities. Theater Mu maintains active partnerships with a wide range of organizations, and PH+T situates its commitment to well-being within a broader network of artists, institutions, and community members. Price emphasizes that sustaining these relationships is not ancillary to the organization's mission but central to its survival and impact, enabling a shared creative ecosystem oriented toward repair and liberation.

At the broadest scale, Fellows show that some of the organizations engage in solidarity across broader coalitions and movements. Esperanza demonstrates this approach through its grounding in

Chicana feminist principles and long-standing movement alliances. Founded to support social movements, Esperanza provides space, logistical support, fiscal sponsorship, and cultural programming that connect art to activism. For example, Esperanza participated in a solidarity campaign to save the Hays Street Bridge in San Antonio's East Side from developers. Local Black activists had asked for its support, and Esperanza was glad to bolster the relationship between the Chicana and Black communities in the city.

Collaboration and solidarity are not simply responses to scarcity but reflect deeply held values about collective care, shared responsibility, and mutual support. By embracing fluid work models and relational practices, the organizations expand capacity, sustain relationships, and build interconnected local and regional arts ecosystems. These approaches challenge dominant narratives of organizational independence and competition, offering alternative models rooted in interdependence and collective resilience.

## **Placemaking and capital investment**

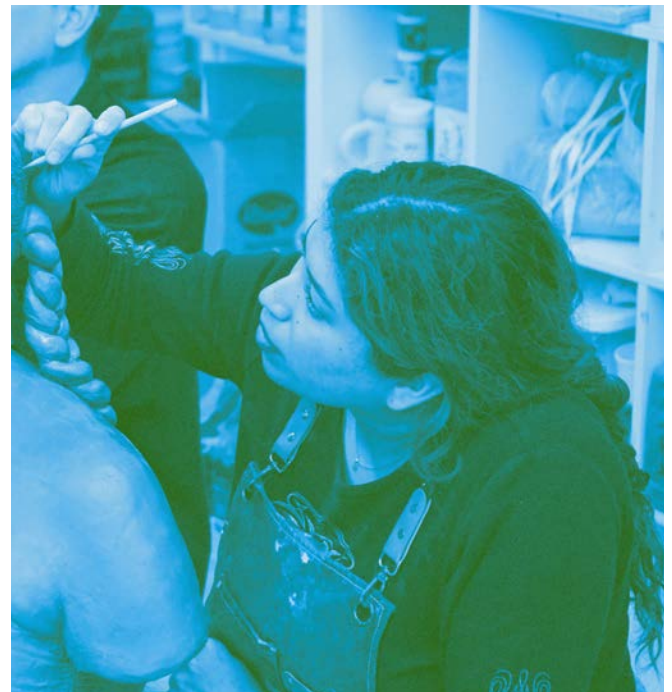
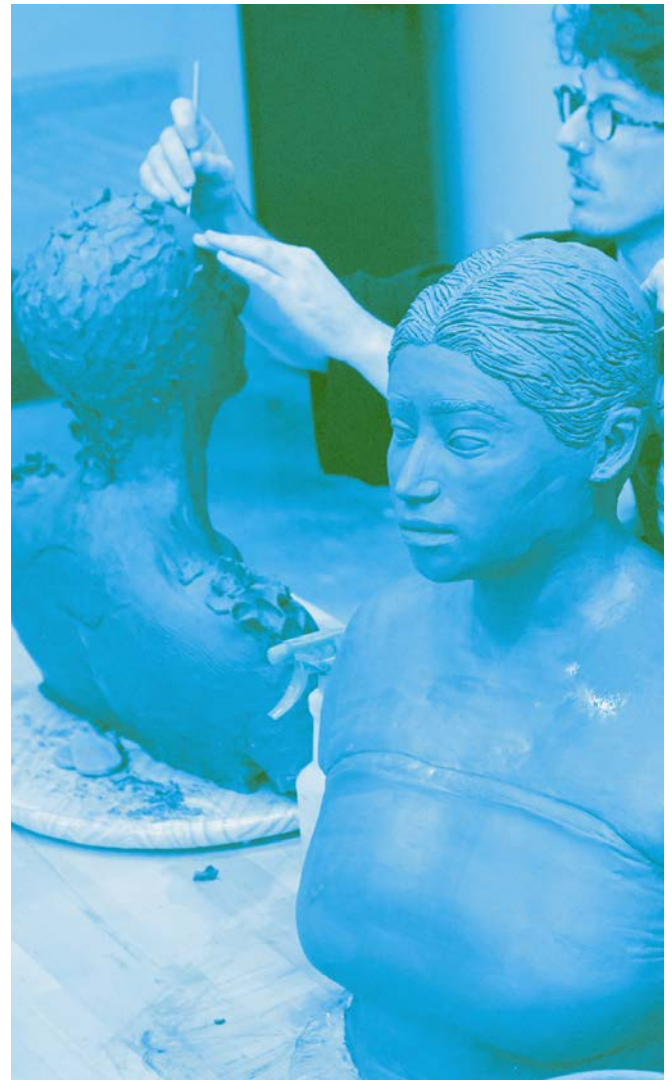
Fellows show how securing space is not simply a logistical concern but a core element of how they sustain relationships, assert presence, and resist erasure. In response to displacement, rising costs, and shrinking access to cultural space, the 18 organizations invest in placemaking and physical infrastructure as long-term strategies for community stability and belonging.

Placemaking takes different forms depending on local context, but it consistently involves creating welcoming environments where cultural production, gathering, and community care can occur. For many organizations, this

has required significant capital investment and long-term fundraising, often in neighborhoods undergoing rapid change. Securing permanent space allows them to stabilize their operations while signaling commitment and accountability to the communities they serve.

At Esperanza, gurudev hernández highlights how control over physical space became essential to survival. Their research traces a history of eviction and funding conflict tied to the organization's political work, including an eviction in 1993 connected to LGBTQ+ programming and a loss of city funding in 1997. Esperanza later regained that funding after a lawsuit. Against this backdrop, Esperanza's leadership came to see ownership as a way to protect its mission and maintain its role as a hub for community organizing, education, and cultural work. Today, Esperanza's space functions as an anchor for movement-building, hosting artistic programming alongside legal support, public dialogue, and coalition work.

Amanda Boston's research on The Laundromat Project (The LP) similarly underscores the importance of private, unsurveilled spaces for community-based arts practice. Located in an increasingly unaffordable neighborhood, The LP's storefront was intentionally framed as a shared community resource instead of a traditional arts venue. Boston notes that the organization defines its spaces as places of gathering, accessibility, and welcome, aligning physical design with its place-based philosophy of bringing art to where people already are. Similarly, Jimenez shows how Pregones/PRTT emphasizes the importance of cultivating a space that feels like home, a place for community members to engage in self-reflection (or self-investigation), especially given the lack of a sovereign homeland for Puerto Ricans.



Placemaking does not always involve formal ownership or institutional expansion. Price's work on PH+T illustrates how organizations may resist conventional models of growth in favor of recognizing and supporting informal, community-generated spaces. In South Minneapolis, where formal placemaking infrastructure has been limited, PH+T understands its role as one of supporting self-determination and avoiding imposing an institutional presence. Price highlights the George Floyd memorial as an example of a community-run space that emerged outside official governance structures yet carried profound cultural and political significance.

The relationship between place and organizational identity extends beyond physical ownership. As Gregory-Kameka documents, BlackStar's location in Philadelphia is understood by its staff not simply as a practical choice but as integral to the organization's values and way of working. Staff describe Philadelphia's character as a working-class city on the margins of dominant cultural centers, enabling the kind of community-building, experimentation, and authenticity that define BlackStar's culture. As the organization has grown, internal debates have emerged about relocating to New York or Los Angeles, to be closer to funders and the film industry. However, many staff expressed concern that a move would dilute the organizational values they associate with Philadelphia. At the same time, Gregory-Kameka identifies a tension that complicates this attachment: As BlackStar occupies space in a historically working-class neighborhood, it must reckon with its own potential role in the gentrification processes it otherwise critiques.

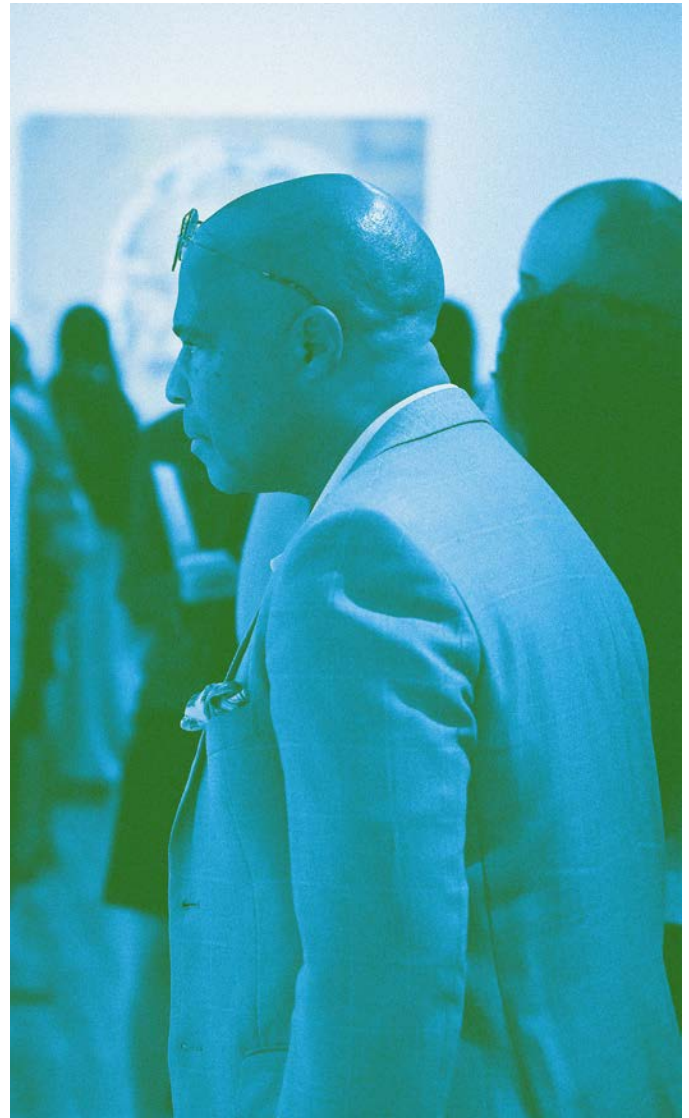
Fellows emphasize that by investing in placemaking, the organizations secure the conditions necessary for long-term cultural presence and community connection. Spaces become meaningful through sustained use, trust, and shared experience, whether secured through ownership, recognized in community-generated forms, or defended as part of an organization's identity and values.



# Opportunities for further research

This report points to several areas where additional research could deepen field-level understanding of arts organizations rooted in communities of color and the conditions that shape their work. These areas for further research would build on the knowledge generated through the ARCC Fellows' research collaborations and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how arts organizations rooted in communities of color evolve, sustain themselves, and shape the broader arts ecosystem.

First, this report highlights the need for longitudinal research on trust, legitimacy, and accountability. Across cases, Fellows document that trust building is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing process shaped by leadership transitions, shifting community needs, and external pressures such as funding cycles and neighborhood changes. Further research that follows organizations over longer periods could illuminate how trust is sustained, or disrupted, over time and how organizations can adapt their practices in response. Such findings offer practical guidance for organizations navigating leadership transitions or shifts in community relationships, and help funders better understand what sustained investment in trust building requires.



Second, the cases suggest opportunities for deeper inquiry into how concepts of artistic excellence are defined, negotiated, and operationalized across different arts communities and fields. While this report documents how organizations contest dominant standards of excellence, further research could examine how these negotiations unfold internally, particularly across generations, governance structures, and artistic disciplines. Such work could also explore how shifting definitions of excellence affect artists' careers, organizational strategy, and audience relationships. For peer organizations and funders, this research would offer grounded frameworks for evaluating artistic work on its own terms, freed from dominant field standards that cannot account for the full range of cultural forms and practices.



Third, the cases underscore the importance of examining labor and care as central components of community-rooted arts work rather than peripheral organizational concerns. Additional research could focus on how care labor, emotional labor, and relational work are distributed and valued within organizations, and how they shape staff retention, leadership development, and organizational resilience. A clearer picture of these dynamics would help organizations strategize for their futures and make the case to funders for investment in staffing, infrastructure, and organizational health as core programmatic needs.

Finally, the cases point to the value of research that looks beyond individual cases to examine artistic networks and funding intermediaries. Many organizations operate within dense webs of collaboration, coalitions, and mutual support. Further study of these relational infrastructures could help the field better understand how capacity is shared, how knowledge circulates, and how collective strategies emerge across organizations facing similar structural constraints. For funders and policymakers, such research could inform more systemic approaches that recognize the interdependence of community-rooted arts organizations.



# Opportunities for institutional support

Fellows' analyses point to a recurring mismatch between how the organizations operate and how institutional support is structured. The work documented throughout this report shows that trust building, reframing dominant narratives, negotiating cultural excellence, sustaining labor and care, and maintaining place-based presence are long-term, relational processes. These forms of work unfold over time and depend on ongoing responsiveness to communities, artists, and changing local and cultural conditions, rather than on short-term outputs or fixed plans.

One challenge identified across cases is accountability. The organizations are accountable first to their communities, histories, and cultural obligations, while also being expected to demonstrate legitimacy within dominant artistic and funding fields. When institutional support emphasizes external recognition or field visibility without equal attention to community-defined values, it can lead to difficult trade-offs that strain trust, labor capacity, or mission clarity.

Fellows also highlight how much of the labor sustaining these organizations extends beyond artistic production. Relationship maintenance, education, care work, translation across audiences, and coalition building are central to organizational survival. Yet these forms of labor can be undervalued or go unnoticed within conventional funding and evaluation structures. As a result, organizations absorb these costs internally, contributing to burnout, turnover, and ongoing precarity.

Finally, the Fellows' work underscores the importance of flexible support that allows for adaptation over time. Community needs shift, leadership changes, and political and economic contexts evolve. Organizations must regularly revisit their practices and priorities in response. Institutional structures that allow for learning, adjustment, and flexibility are more aligned with the realities documented across the organizations than those that require fixed identities or narrowly defined outcomes.

These findings point to the value of institutional support that is attentive to both process and product and that allows organizations to remain accountable to the communities from which their work emerges. Such alignment does not prescribe a single model of support, but underscores the importance of responsiveness to context, history, and practice as evidenced across the ARCC cases.

# Conclusion

This cross-case analysis brings together 18 research partnerships between early-career scholars and arts organizations<sup>2</sup> with varied artistic disciplines, geographies, and organizational histories. The Fellows document how these organizations operate within layered conditions of constraint and possibility, navigate histories of disinvestment and mistrust, contend with narrow definitions of artistic value, and sustain labor-intensive practices with limited resources. At the same time, they have developed ways of working grounded in long-term community and movement relationships, cultural accountability, and creative experimentation. Trust building, narrative reframing, education, archival practice, collaboration, and placemaking emerge not as discrete programmatic choices but as interdependent practices, deeply embedded in organizational life and crucial to sustaining artistic and civic vitality.

Arts organizations rooted in communities of color do not follow a single model of success, nor is the externally-defined success of a single organization prized above building equitable and expansive access to cultural and artistic production, cultivating relationships with local and international community. They are continually negotiating tensions between community-defined values and field-level expectations, between flexibility and structure, and between local accountability and broader artistic participation. These negotiations are ongoing and are influenced by changing community and internal organizational needs, leadership transitions, and external pressures, including financial precarity, community mistrust, and changes in their artistic field.

By synthesizing ethnographic insights across cases, this report supports field-level learning about how arts organizations rooted in communities of color function within the contemporary arts ecosystem. It highlights patterns, tensions, and practices that can inform future research, learning, and dialogue among researchers, practitioners, and funders interested in sustainability and cultural vitality in the arts.

<sup>2</sup> While the ARCC Fellowship included 18 research partnerships, this report draws primarily from 16 case studies submitted by Fellows. The cross-case analysis also reflects the SSRC team's engagement with all participating organizations through regular convenings and site visits to some of them throughout the initiative.

# Annex

# ARCC Fellows, Organizations & Locations

Monica Barra

Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, Charlotte, NC

Ying Diao

Ragamala Dance Company, Minneapolis, MN

Timnet Gedar

Chicago Sinfonietta, Chicago, IL

Nazanin Gaffari

Rebuild Foundation, Chicago, IL

Raquel Jimenez

Pregones / Puerto Rican Traveling Theater, New York, NY

Asif Majid

Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, MI

Jason Price

Pillsbury House + Theatre, Minneapolis, MN

Jason White

The Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE

Davinia Gregory-Kameka

BlackStar, Philadelphia, PA

Cameron Herman

1Hood Media Academy, Pittsburgh, PA

DeRon Williams

Philadelphia Dance Company, Philadelphia, PA

Amanda Boston

The Laundromat Project, Brooklyn, NY

J.V. Decemvirale

Self Help Graphics & Art, Los Angeles, CA

Claudia Sofía Garriga-López

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, San Juan, PR

siri gurudev hernández

Esperanza Peace & Justice Center, San Antonio, TX

Silvia Rodriguez Vega

Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project (QWOCMAP), San Francisco, CA

kt shorb

Theater Mu, Saint Paul, MN

Jaleesa Wells

Oakland Collective (Black Cultural Zone, Eastside Arts Alliance & Artist as First Responder), Oakland, CA

## Suggested Readings

Barra, Monica P. "Legacy and evolution: The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture." *Museum Archeology* 47, no. 2 (Fall 2024): 99–110, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12300>.

Majid, Asif. "Playing with Statues: Race, Space, Performance, and the Arab American National Museum." *ASAP/ Journal* 9, no. 2 (May 2024): 269–287, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2024.a947146>.

The Wallace Foundation. *Labor of Love: Working for and with a Black Cultural Center*. A research brief describing an ethnographic study of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture in Charlotte, North Carolina. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-A00139.001>.

The Wallace Foundation. *From Margins to Center Stage*. A research brief describing an ethnographic study of Theater Mu in the Twin Cities by kt shorb. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-A04745.001>.

The Wallace Foundation. *Owning Their Own Stories*. A research brief describing an ethnographic study of the Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project in San Francisco by Silvia Rodriguez Vega. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.59656/AA09074.001>.

The Wallace Foundation. *Producing Counternarratives*. A research brief describing an ethnographic study of the Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in New York City by Raquel Jimenez. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-A07893.001>.

The Wallace Foundation. *Make Art. Build Community. Create Change*. A research brief describing a case study by Amanda Boston of The Laundromat Project in Brooklyn, New York. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-A07477.001>.

The Wallace Foundation. *The Legacy of the Founder: A Case Study of Chicago Sinfonietta*. A research brief describing a case study by Timnet Gedar. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.59656/AA04306.001>

The Wallace Foundation. *Gradients of Trust: An Ethnographic Study of The Union for Contemporary Art in Omaha, Nebraska*. A research brief describing a case study by Jason C. White. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-A04306.001>.

## Bibliography

Barra, Monica P. "Case Study: The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture." Unpublished report. 2024.

Boston, Amanda. "'Make Art. Build Community. Create Change.': A Case Study of The Laundromat Project." Unpublished report. 2025.

Decemvirale, John Vincent (J.V.). "Self Help Graphics and Art Ethnography: An Excavation of Human Infrastructure." Unpublished report. 2025.

Diao, Ying. "Unbound by Tradition: Ragamala Dance Company and (Im)mobility in the Making of Indian Classical Dance in Diaspora." Unpublished report. 2025.

Garriga-López, Claudia Sofía. "Built to Last, Born to Fight: Enduring Colonialism at the MAC." Unpublished report. 2025.

Gedar, Timnet. "'The Last Bastion of Elitism': The Chicago Sinfonietta and New Inroads in Classical Music." Unpublished report. 2024.

Ghaffari, Nazanin. "Make a Thing that Makes a Thing: Investigating an Artist-Led Initiative Celebrating Black Spaces, Black Objects, and Black Arts in South Side Chicago." Unpublished report. 2025.

Gregory-Kameka, Davinia. "BlackStar Rising: The Purpose, Location, and Relationships that Constitute a Black-led Media Arts Organization." Unpublished report. 2025.

hernández, siri gurudev. "Moving Solidaridad: The Case of Esperanza Peace and Justice Center." Unpublished report. 2025.

Jimenez, Raquel. "Organizing for Culturally Specific Art: A Case Study of the Pregones/Puerto Rican Traveling Theater." Unpublished report. 2024.

Majid, Asif. "Accessing the Past, Maintaining the Present: History, Immigration, and Independence at the Arab American National Museum." Unpublished report. 2024.

Price, Jason J. "Ethnographic Reflections from Pillsbury House + Theatre." Unpublished report. 2025.

Rodriguez Vega, Silvia. "Flocks of Films: Queer Women of Color Media Arts Project's Values and Legacy." Unpublished report. 2025.

shorb, kt. "Race, Representation, and Minnesota: A Case Study of Theater Mu." Unpublished report. 2025.

Wells, Jaleesa Renee. *Building a Black Arts Institution: A Case Study*. 2024. <https://www.drjaleesawells.com/arccfellowship>.

Wells, Jaleesa Renee. *Stewarding Black Cultural Resilience: A Case Study*. 2024. <https://www.drjaleesawells.com/arccfellowship>.

White, Jason C. "Ten Months at The Union for Contemporary Art." *American Journal of Arts Management* 13, no. 1, (February 2025), <https://www.artsmanagementjournal.com/s/Ten-Months-at-The-Union-for-Contemporary-Art.pdf>.





