CALI CATALYST

2021 GRANTEES

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ABOUT CENTER FOR CULTURAL INNOVATION

Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI) was founded in 2001 as a California 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation. Its mission is to support individuals in the arts—artists, culture bearers, and creative entrepreneurs—to realize greater self determination so as to unfetter their productivity, free expression, and social impact, which contributes to shaping our collective national identity in ways that reflect the diversity of society.

In addition, by acting as a cross-sector incubator with an informed point of view, CCI advances efforts to improve conditions for artists and all those who share artists' conditions of low wages, high debt, and too-few assets.

For more information about CCI, visit cciarts.org.

ABOUT CALI CATALYST

CALI Catalyst provides unrestricted grants of up to $5,000 to California changemakers who are shifting the arts and culture sector in ways that tangibly give underrepresented voices more power and influence.

In 2021, CCI launched the California Art Leadership Investments (CALI) Catalyst grant program, which supports artists and arts workers who are on the frontlines of effecting greater inclusion, access, diversity, and equity in the arts and culture sector. Through bold actions, these individuals are tangibly helping underrepresented communities—including Black, Indigenous, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and people with disabilities—gain more influence and power in the arts and culture sector. We consider these bold actions to be “changemaking” because they are visibly moving the needle for underrepresented communities to have more influence and power at an industry-wide level.

The CALI Catalyst grant program is made possible with support from:

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

2021 GRANTEES

The CALI Catalyst program awarded 19 grants in its pilot year. Grants were made to California artists and arts workers who applied as individuals and teams, or were nominated.

JAMIE ALDAYA

Individual, San Francisco County

Jamie Makani Aldaya. Owner. See Color, See Me Project
Jamie Aldaya Apparel Development Consulting, LLC.
24 December 2021. San Francisco, CA.
Photo by S72 Business Portraits.

Website

Jamie Aldaya is foregrounding inclusion and diversity in the fashion industry, starting with the design process itself.

Jamie Aldaya is Native Hawaiian-Filipino, an award-winning apparel developer, and a 35-year veteran of the fashion industry. Having worked in various production, development, and design roles throughout his career, he's well-versed in the path that a garment takes from sketch to store rack. For emerging and established designers alike, the design process begins with an exclusive focus on one's concept, rendered on croquis (standard body templates) that are often faceless and without any distinguishing features. (The selection of models and imagery occurs at a much later stage.) Aldaya believes that this seemingly innocuous practice has resulted in diversity being an afterthought in the design process. To counter this, Aldaya published a series of bullet sketchbooks for fashion designers (combination bullet journal + fashion design sketchbook) with ethnic-inspired croquis. His intention was to produce a mass market solution that moves from focusing on the clothes to focusing on the people clothed. For Aldaya, the bullet sketchbooks "make designing with diversity easier" in an industry where racial inequities and exclusion are entrenched.

TAYLOR BRANDON

Individual, Alameda County

Taylor Brandon is holding the museum industry accountable for its performative allyship and anti-Blackness.

Taylor Brandon is an artist and writer from Oakland, CA whose practice is grounded in the study of Black geographies, Black American cultural lineages, her family, and her experience as a Black queer woman. On May 30, 2020, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) used the work of artist Glenn Ligon to address the murder of George Floyd on Instagram. Brandon posted a lengthy response in the post's comments section that culminated with, "museums kill Black people too." Her comment was deleted, which prompted a series of actions initiated by Brandon—including a national communications campaign that saw coverage by Vanity Fair and The New York Times—and her allies to hold arts institutions accountable for censorship and anti-Blackness. As a result, Brandon brought greater attention to the mistreatment of Black employees within cultural institutions and mobilized SFMOMA staff to keep the pressure on leadership and advocate for themselves.

Taylor Brandon. San Francisco, CA. 2019.
Photo by Drew Altizer Photography.

Website Instagram

JENNIFER CRYSTAL CHIEN

Individual, Alameda County

Jennifer Crystal Chien. Oakland, CA. January 2022.
Photo by Jennifer Crystal Chien.

Website

Jennifer Crystal Chien is protecting the interests of underrepresented communities and interrogating the rigor of industry-level practices around informed consent.

Jennifer Crystal Chien is a documentary filmmaker and the co-founder of Re-Present Media, which advocates for personal storytelling from underrepresented communities in documentary film and nonfiction media. On September 26, 2021, the New York Times reported that some of the Yazidi women shown in the documentary film *Sabaya*, which depicts the rescue of women who were sexually enslaved by ISIS members from a refugee camp in Syria, did not consent to participate in it. Chien was deeply disturbed not only that such a film could be made in such an unethical and retraumatizing manner, but that it had won a top award for Directing in World Cinema Documentary from Sundance Institute earlier in 2021. This practice happens far too often in documentary filmmaking, in that communities who are filmed are harmed by well-intentioned but mistaken efforts to “help” them. In response, Chien worked collaboratively with several women advocates domestically and internationally on an online advocacy and education campaign that included a widely circulated petition to request that Sundance Institute revoke its award and make reparations to the women harmed, and a blog series about ethics and survivor-centered filmmaking practices. These actions influenced the International Documentary Association, a prominent film organization, to replace its screening of *Sabaya* with an informed consent workshop. The Sundance Institute also responded that while its award would not be rescinded, conversations around informed consent practices were vital to the field. The pressures mounted by this campaign increased attention to the ethical and social issues surrounding informed consent practices and the power imbalances between documentarians and the individuals they are portraying.

A.M. DARKE

Individual, Alameda County

A.M. Darke at her home in Oakland, CA. September 2021.

A.M. Darke is challenging issues of power and representation in the 3D asset marketplace through the creation of an open source database for 3D models of Black hair textures and styles.

A.M. Darke is a gender chaotic Black artist and scholar designing radical tools for social intervention. Their changemaking action began in 2020 with the in-progress Open Source Afro Hair Library (OSAHL), a queer, feminist, anti-racist database for 3D models of Black hair textures and styles. The impetus for OSAHL came from the limited representation of Black people in games and digital media. Across digital media, Black people are portrayed in ways that are derogatory, inaccurate, stereotypical, demeaning, and otherwise harmful–if we are depicted at all. The representation of afro-textured hair is noticeably limited, with options ranging from comically large afros, unstyled “dread” locs, and misshapen cornrows. In real life, natural Black hair is considered a liability in academic and professional settings, with Black people being subject to loss of employment, school suspension, and even having our hair forcibly removed before being allowed in athletic competitions. To support Black creators in authoring their own visions of the virtual Black body, Darke launched the OSAHL remote residency through which residents receive a stipend and are connected with a network of other Black artists as they create Black hair assets that are authentic and culturally resonant. Per user access, Darke is intentionally making OSAHL free and open source in order to: 1) have a broad impact on relevant industries and ecosystems by lowering the barrier for all creators–both hobbyists and professionals–to integrate accurate, diverse, and respectful representations of Blackness in digital media; 2) enact a creative intervention in white-male-capitalist dominated tech spaces; and 3) make the open source community itself more diverse. (Ironically, the open source community is less diverse than the "white-male-capitalist dominated tech space” that it aims to subvert.)

Website

MONICA GALVAN

Lead Team Member, Santa Cruz County

Monica Galvan and team are normalizing the representation of marketplaces owned and run by those rooted in Mexican culture.

Monica Galvan represents the collective Arte Del Corazon whose members are a mix of artists and arts administrators in Watsonville, California. Arte Del Corazon provides a space for local artists of color to sell their artwork monthly in Watsonville, and usage of their social media presence for promotion and visibility. When COVID-19 hit, local artists were faced with a need to transition from in-person to online sales. Arte del Corazon responded by providing a virtual Mercado (ala Mexico's Mercados Artesanales, where local handmade artisanal goods are sold to the community) in July 2020 called Mercado de la Red. The online market promoted artists—particularly Latino artists who have limited opportunities to show and sell their work at regional venues—and, four months later, the Mercado added a monthly outdoor market event in Watsonville. Galvan and the collective members observed that arts markets in Watsonville were previously not geared towards the community at large. With the Mercados, artists who previously had inconsistent, onerous, and/or limited access to show and sell their work, now had opportunities to participate in a more inclusive arts and culture ecosystem in their region. Consequently, more and more markets are taking place in Watsonville by organizers of color and markets that before were presented in nearby Santa Cruz, San Jose, and Salinas are now hosted in town as artists have begun to see the potential of Watsonville as a place to share their work with the community.

Team Members: Monica Galvan, Nessa Ledesma, Alejandra Hernandez, Isa Moreno, Marisa Marquez

Monica Galvan. August 2021. Watsonville, CA.
Photo by Sarah Brothers.

Website Instagram

JOEL GARCIA

Individual, Los Angeles County

Website Instagram

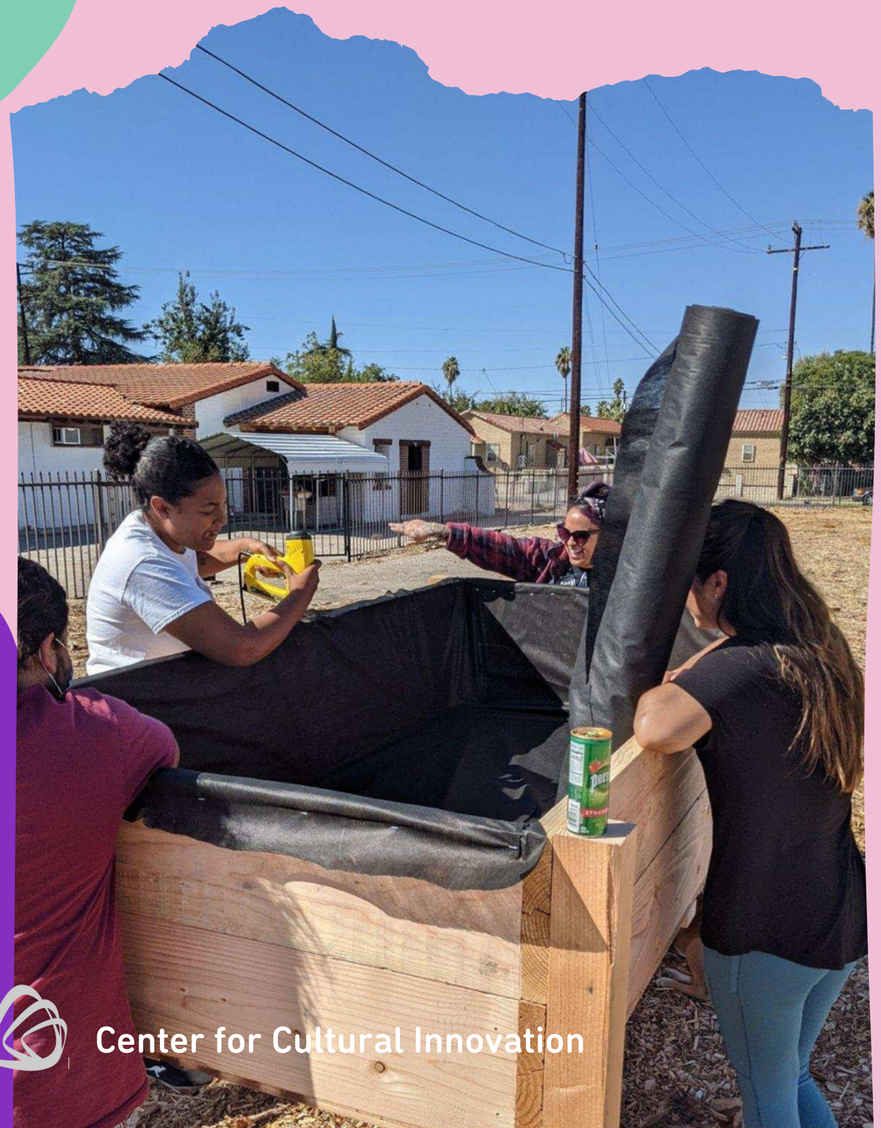
Yaangna. Olvera Street, Los Angeles, CA. 2020.
Photo by Joel Garcia.

Joel Garcia is decolonizing municipal art collections and increasing access to funding for Indigenous-led creative efforts and artists.

Joel Garcia is an Indigenous artist (Huichol) and cultural organizer who uses Indigenous-based frameworks to center those most impacted, and arts-based strategies to raise awareness of issues facing underserved communities, youth, and other targeted populations. Garcia played a critical role in the removal of Los Angeles' Columbus statue in 2018 and later, in the removal of its Father Serra statue (2020). Both removals were strategic actions to raise the visibility of Los Angeles' First Peoples, increase access and funding for Indigenous-led creative efforts and artists, change policies within the arts, and, primarily, to decolonize publicly owned art collections such as those with the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the Los Angeles County Department of Arts & Culture. Informed by Garcia's actions, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation developed a dedicated grant program for the removal of monuments, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Occidental College have focused programming on the issue, and the Los Angeles Mayor's Office of Civic Memory Working Group released a report with 18 key recommendations connected to undoing the whitewashing of Indigenous histories.

Website Instagram

Pictured from left to right: Hector Guzman, Saniyyah Thomas, Natalie Larios, and Nadia Solis. San Bernardino, CA. October 2021. Photo by Jorge Heredia.



JORGE HEREDIA

Lead Team Member, San Bernardino County

Jorge Heredia and team are fostering a community of creatives who are influencing and altering the artistic, cultural, and political landscape in San Bernardino.

Jorge Heredia is an artist, community organizer, and the Director of the Garcia Center for the Arts in San Bernardino. He and his team are mostly young (20s and early 30s) artists, creatives, educators, and arts administrators who are invested in uplifting their community. They recognize that San Bernardino is an area that has been chronically extracted from, under-resourced, and underfunded. Moreover, while the city is composed primarily of Latino/Hispanic people, this group is not represented in nonprofit or municipal leadership positions. Heredia and his network have been steadily shifting their surroundings by way of building the first art galleries and first art centers in the City of San Bernardino; bringing younger people into official meetings and organizations, such as the city's arts commission; running for elected office and joining nonprofit boards; and since 2020, creating community gardens as an urban planning intervention and as a model for sustainability and collaboration. In so doing, a new generation is entering into positions of power and influence, to not only improve the quality of life in San Bernardino, but to also better represent the community as a whole.

Team Members: Jorge Heredia, Samuel Armando Castro, Hector Guzman, Nadia Solis, Natalie Larios, Valerie Dobesh, James Ojeda

SKYLAR HOUZE

Lead Team Member, Los Angeles County

Skylar Houze and team are shifting the dance industry towards more inclusive and diverse body size and type standards.

Skylar Houze works in partnership with Jemel McWilliams—of Jemel McWilliams Productions—who is a highly regarded creative, working as choreographer and artistic director for notable artists such as Janelle Monáe, Lizzo, John Legend, and Alicia Keys. Skylar shared that she and her team “are black working in industries that are run by people who do not look like us. We fight for our space and our voices to be heard…” The team’s changemaking work has been in the realm of catalyzing diversity and inclusion in dance that extends beyond skin tone to include body shapes and sizes. Using their highly visible platform, the team has sought to influence industry beauty and body type standards by hiring full-bodied dancers for many of their productions. Their intention has been to transform the designation of these dancers as “specialty acts” to being dancers who are booked and hired just as regularly as anyone else. In other words, they want to remove the barriers for dancers who have the ability, but who are unable to access professional opportunities due to their body shape or size. The team has challenged the industry overtly, as well. In early 2020, Jemel spoke out on social media and in online and print publication interviews, such as DANCE magazine and Dance Spirit, criticizing talent agencies that time and again were unable to answer his calls for full-figured dancers—instead sending talent that were at most, a size 4. (The average American woman is a size 16.) McWilliams's public critiques coincided with the larger movement for body inclusivity, thus putting pressure on agencies to change their ways. Change at an industry level has occurred with more and more agencies representing full-figured dancers, and looking to JMC Productions to advise on recruitment and bookings.

Team Members: Jemel McWilliams and Skylar Houze

Courtesy of grantee. JMC Productions. Los Angeles, CA.

Website Instagram

ANN JAMES

Individual, Los Angeles County

Ann James is influencing the direction of the intimacy industry away from the field's homogeneity.

Ann James has an extensive career in international stage direction and theatre education spanning over three decades. In March 2020, she wrote an article for HowlRound—a free and open platform for theatremakers worldwide that amplifies progressive, disruptive ideas about the art form—that shook the still-nascent intimacy industry to its core. She posed that leadership in the intimacy direction field did not fairly represent the global majority and set out to make change happen. Also in 2020, Ann founded Intimacy Coordinators of Color (ICOC) to provide her skills as an Intimacy Professional to projects that center the stories of Black, Indigenous and People of Color actors in the theatre industry. Recently, the ICOC accredited nine cohort members to work as experienced intimacy professionals.

Courtesy of grantee. Ann James. Los Angeles, CA.

Website Instagram

RHIANNON EVANS MACFADYEN

Individual, San Francisco County

Rhiannon Evans MacFadyen is voicing dissent and pushing for equity in civic and nonprofit spaces.

Rhiannon Evans MacFadyen is a curator, consultant, facilitator, and project-based artist in San Francisco. With 20 years of experience in the folkloric and visual arts, Rhiannon is deeply influenced by their own–and their communities'–intersectional identities and by their pursuit of "productive discomfort." Their actions in 2020–2021 re-centered the voices, experiences, needs, and protocols of marginalized communities by voicing dissent and pushing for equity in civic and nonprofit spaces, specifically by co-organizing and co-facilitating public forums for accountability and speaking openly to the press about the misappropriation of resources from BIPOC organizations and artists by large, white-led nonprofits and civic bodies. This work led Rhiannon to appear in spring 2021 in Bay Area news outlets, KQED and SF Chronicle, on matters of funding and labor. The Chronicle pieces centered their image and strong language about how inequitable funding harms communities, and that the forces for healing, safety, and culture must remain entirely in the hands of BIPOC communities and organizations.

Rhiannon Evans MacFadyen. San Francisco, CA. 2021.
Photo by Rhiannon Evans MacFadyen.

Website

DAVID MACK
Individual, Alameda County

David Mack is advancing initiatives to create a more equitable L.A. County arts ecosystem.

David Mack is an arts administrator, producer, and consultant currently living in Oakland. His work has centered marginalized communities in L.A. County's Second Supervisorial District, where he is professionally and artistically rooted, having lived and worked in L.A. County for sixteen years. In 2020, he was appointed to the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture's Cultural Equity and Inclusion Initiative Advisory Committee (LACDAC CEII) to represent the Second Supervisorial District. After his first committee meeting in November 2020, he realized that not only were the Department's current recommendations for advancing cultural equity—which had been developed in 2014—no longer sufficient to make the necessary impact required to implement its goals, but also the structure of the committee was itself oppressive and unsafe for marginalized voices. He began working with individual committee members to develop seven new recommendations that were more relevant to advancing cultural and racial equity in light of the Black Lives Matter and We See You White American Theatre movements. The recommendations also aimed at creating a more democratic structure of committee discussion with the intention of holding leadership accountable to conversations around the adoption of a new CEII report. What's more, the recommendations called for equitable pay structures in response to the 2021 Claremont Graduate University study "Make or Break: Race and Ethnicity in Entry-Level Compensation for Arts Administrators in Los Angeles County," which found that arts administrators of color as well as cisgender women were on average paid less than their white cisgender male counterparts regardless of education level. Mack advocated for a motion for a full Advisory Committee vote on forwarding the new recommendations to LACDAC staff, which is currently under consideration by Committee leadership. He remains undeterred by the unsafe conditions that his advocacy created, and is committed to advancing a committee structure that is empowering of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ members.

David Mack. Los Angeles, CA. October 2021.
Photo by Jeff Ellingson.

Website

ELY SONNY ORQUIZA

Individual, San Francisco County

Ely Sonny Orquiza is cultivating a more equitable and accountable Bay Area theater and performing arts industry.

Ely Sonny Orquiza is a freelance theater maker and teaching artist who actively amplifies, champions, and uplifts the stories of Asian Diaspora, Asian American narratives, Queer experiences, and the multitude of voices from historically marginalized groups for the American Theater. On June 9, 2020, Ely first published *The Living Document of BIPOC Experiences in the Bay Area Theater*, in reaction to Black Lives Matter in-solidarity statements made by regional theatre and performing arts companies. *The Living Document* is a public, community-based document chronicling the experiences of BIPOC creatives and the extent of White Supremacy in the Bay Area theater industry with over 600 personal testimonies of grievances spanning from 2004 to present. In July 2020, Orquiza published the BIPOC Equity Action Plan. It serves as a supplement to *The Living Document* with immediate and actionable steps for theater institutions to take so as to stop harmful behaviors and practices, and build a diverse, equitable, and inclusive theater and performing arts industry. As a result of and since the creation of *The Living Document*, Bay Area theater and performing arts companies have published actionable plans that confront White Supremacy, foster an equitable environment, and enact effective methods of organizational accountability.

Ely Sonny Orquiza. San Francisco, CA. 2020.
Photo by Josie Norris.

Website Instagram

ASHLEY SOTO PANIAGUA

Individual, Los Angeles County

Website Instagram

Ashley Soto Paniagua. Los Angeles, CA. 2021.
Photo by Alexandria Stuart.

Ashley Soto Paniagua is increasing access for Black TV writers in the entertainment industry.

Ashley Soto Paniagua is Mexican and AfroPuerto Rican and currently works as a writer on the “Proud Family” reboot on Disney+. In the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder, Ashley, like so many, grappled with how to create longstanding change and dismantle systemic racism. She looked first to the entertainment industry, where, according to the Color of Change, Black TV writers make up 4.8% of total working TV writers. She also identified that one of the biggest barriers to access for breaking in as a TV writer is a professional network, as meetings with high profile writers often require manager/agent representation as an initial first step of many. Given the conditions created by the pandemic, Ashley capitalized on the growing norm of virtual connections by co-founding #RaisethePercentage, an initiative that facilitated one-on-one 30-minute virtual coffees from June 15 - June 21, 2020 between working TV writers and Black writers (AfroLatinx included) who've yet to staff on a TV show. Working under the assumption that building a network is just as important as the writing itself, #RaisethePercentage made no promise to participants of securing a job, only the offer to network virtually. To ensure that gaining access didn’t also mean creating more barriers, the only requirement that was asked of participants was to attend a virtual webinar to set expectations for the virtual coffees. This allowed the initiative to be more porous, as opposed to onerous by way of an application or adjudication process. The initiative culminated with 319 professional TV writers participating in virtual coffees with a total of 1,078 emerging Black/Afrolatinx participants over 539 hours. Since June 21, virtual coffees have become a commonplace and accessible way for emerging writers to connect with working TV writers, with corporate entities such as Disney Branded Television and Sony.

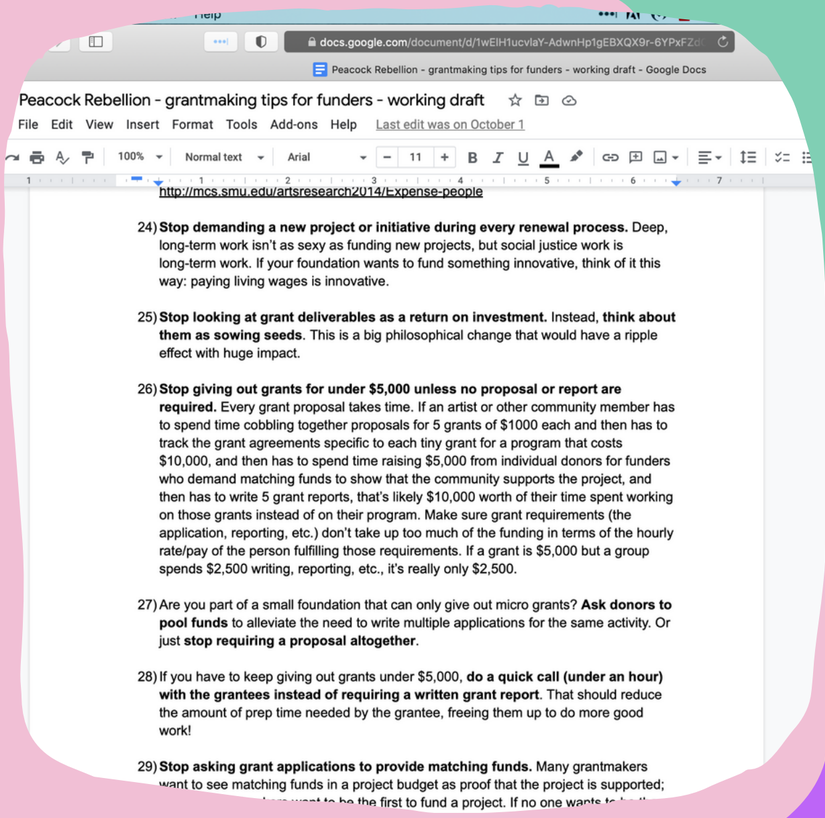
DEVI PEACOCK

Lead Team Member, Alameda County

Devi Peacock and team are accelerating pathways for BIPOC communities to receive the financial resources necessary for self-determination.

Devi Peacock is a sixteenth-generation storyteller and a comedy writer covering social justice issues like global warming and Beyoncé albums. They're also the Executive Director & Founding Artistic Director of Peacock Rebellion, a Bay Area-based, trans and queer BIPOC crew of artist-activist-healers. In 2021, Devi began collaborating with members of the Peacock Rebellion and QTBIPOC allies (i.e., the "team") to address the anemic levels of foundation and government funding available to BIPOC-led organizations, as well as growing instances of white-led organizations securing funding intended for BIPOC communities under the guise of performative DEI initiatives. To reverse these harmful practices, the team is developing, *Racial Justice in the Arts: Grantmaking Tips for Funders Guide*. The purpose of *The Guide* is to give concrete tools and spelled-out practices to cut bureaucracy and other barriers preventing BIPOC grantseekers from successfully accessing institutional funding opportunities. *The Guide's* quick, easy-to-implement changes can have an outsized impact on the BIPOC community to apply for grants, manage the grant process, build relationships with funders, serve on grant panels, and ultimately re-center the field of philanthropy toward equity, specifically from an intersectional lens that centers racial justice and insists on cultural competence when working with BIPOC, TGNC, and Disabled communities.

Team Members: Alex Lee, Claudia Leung, Crystal Middlestadt, Devi Peacock, Hana/Connor Yankowitz, Kebo Drew, Kiyomi Fujikawa, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Maria Nakae, Mia Nakano, Patty Berne, Q Sajid, Ryan Li Dahlstrom, Sean Dorsey, Shaena Johnson, StormMiguel Florez, and Talia Estrada-Holguin



Courtesy of grantee, Devi Peacock, Peacock Rebellion. Grantmaking Tips for Funders Guide. Richmond, CA. 2021.

Website Instagram

Center for Cultural Innovation

LETICIA FORNEY RESCH

Lead Team Member, Santa Barbara County

Leticia Forney Resch. Santa Barbara, CA. June 2021.
Photo by Kyra Glover.

Website Instagram

Leticia Forney Resch and team are empowering and uplifting the Black community in Santa Barbara County.

Leticia Forney Resch is a core member of Healing Justice Santa Barbara (HJSB), a collective which first emerged in 2016 as a local Black Lives Matter advocacy chapter. It evolved over time, becoming HJSB to uplift additional leadership that arrived in June 2020. Since then, HJSB has led efforts to highlight local Black artists, celebrate Black culture, honor and Archive Black History, and include the voices and experiences of the Black community, who have long been excluded from the region's art galleries and the arts sector in general. In addition, the collective has kept pressure on the Santa Barbara City Council to direct funds set aside for "equity" to establish a Black and African-American cultural resource center. Over the past 18 months, the collective has organized distinct programs including a Black History Month event series, “Art is Activism" campaign, “Black is Beautiful virtual artist showcase,” Juneteenth celebration, Black Historical Tour, Chocolate Baby story time series and the Melanin Gallery–a gallery in downtown Santa Barbara that opened temporarily for the month of June 2021 to coincide with Juneteenth activities and showcase Black artists. The community's overwhelmingly enthusiasm for the space has kept it open with no closing date in sight. From these efforts, Leticia describes how, thanks to the continued efforts of HJSB’s founders (Simone Riskamp and Krystle Sieghart), programs like these can uplift folks of color to see themselves represented in the art being showcased, the artists creating the work, and leadership in the art world (i.e., the producers of these programs).

Team Members: Simone Akila Rushkamp, Leticia Forney Resch, Krystle Farmer Sieghart, Mariah Jones-Bisquera

RACHEL SANDERS

Individual, Trinity County

Rachel Sanders is amplifying the voices of artists of color in Humboldt County's arts ecosystem.

Rachel Sanders is a non-binary, queer, African-American artist and creator working in theatre, dance, and music. She produces, organizes, and curates *Only Skin Deep*, a seasonal art and dance performance that premiered in September 2020. The show centers the voices of artists of Indigenous, Pan African, Latinx, Asian, and Mixed Heritage in Humboldt County, California. These artists have long been overshadowed by the presence of cultural appropriation and subjected to systematic violence and the inherent racism, colorism, and fetishism that persist in everyday interactions. Humboldt County's lack of cultural diversity—24% of the population being folks of culturally marginalized groups—means that it lacks an abundance of the very people needed to tackle these issues. Many artists in Humboldt who identify with these groups have the shared experience of feeling misunderstood, mistreated, underrepresented, and underappreciated. These artists remark on the scarcity of opportunities to celebrate themselves as both part of their own, often varied, cultural lineage and as a modern person of unique interests. *Only Skin Deep* provides this opportunity in addition to promoting community conversations around race, privilege, and identity and encouraging the inclusion of more diverse perspectives in these conversations. Participating artists can control and center their own narratives, an act that–in rural Humboldt County–is bold for its disruption to regional white hegemony.

Courtesy of grantee. Rachel Sanders. Eureka, CA. 2020.

Website Instagram

Instagram

Chris Steel. San Francisco, CA.
Photo by Nic Candito.

CHRIS STEELE

Nominee, San Francisco County

Chris Steele is advocating for Trans inclusive casting in the Bay Area theater and performing arts industry.

Chris Steele is a queer Trans nonbinary performance artist working in the Bay Area over the last ten years as an actor, writer, director, arts administrator, producer, and designer (costumes, lighting, and makeup). Chris is also a founding member of the Trans & Gender Non-Conforming Advocacy Collective, which focuses on supporting Bay Area Trans artists through different forms of community engagement. In June 2021, Chris directly and publicly challenged American Conservatory Theater (A.C.T.), when it released advertisements for a recording of a previous performance of the play *Tales of the City, The Musical* which included a cisgender actor portraying a Trans role. Chris took to social media, bringing attention to the harm caused by A.C.T.'s casting practice and absence of financial support—via shared streaming profits—with any members or groups of the Trans community. Chris' actions changed this. As a result, A.C.T. has opened the door to new relationships with Trans casting advocates.

JAVIER STELL-FRESQUEZ AND MIKO THOMAS

Lead Team Members, San Francisco County

Curators of Weaving Spirits Festival. Pictured from left to right: Landa Lakes & Javier Stell-Fresquez. San Francisco, CA. March 2020. Yelamu. Photo by Robbie Sweeney.

Javier Stell-Fresquez, Miko Thomas, and team are seeding the growth of the Two-Spirit performance field, including within the Native American communities where they have been invisible.

Javier Stell-Fresquez (Mixed-race Xicanx, Piru, and Tigua) and Miko Thomas (Chickasaw) are leaders within the Two-Spirit (2S) community and regular contributors to the emerging fabric of Bay Area 2S life. They advocate locally and nationally for cultural equity, and work as performance artists, arts consultants, and producers of Indigenous and LGBTQ2S+ cultural events. They co-curate the Weaving Spirits Festival of Two-Spirit Performance–the first ongoing festival of its kind. Weaving Spirits is produced in partnership with the Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits (BAAITS), which has hosted a single day powwow for the 2S community annually for 11 years. Thomas co-founded the BAAITS Powwow, the largest annual 2S gathering of its kind. Thomas and Stell-Fresquez are honored to have volunteered for years alongside the many community members of the powwow committee, whose collective efforts have shepherded 2S visibility to a tipping point upon which younger generations can now build. Weaving Spirits expands upon BAAITS's momentum to decolonize gender and sexuality across Turtle Island by catalyzing 2S performance artists' careers, creating decolonial institutional partnerships with host venues, and weaving the ways of the past into the loom of the present. In March 2022, the Weaving Spirits Festival will return to CounterPulse with a series of live performance weekends, panels, and workshops.

Team Members: Javier Stell-Fresquez, Miko Thomas, Bex Salas, and Grisel Torres

Website Instagram

Center for Cultural Innovation

ALEX WEST

Individual, Los Angeles / Riverside County

Alex West is creating an artist-supported commercial distribution platform for Black content creators to have a home.

As a black filmmaker from South Los Angeles, West recounts battling film executives, literary agents, and film producers from large productions companies who openly expressed disinterest in Black media content. Conversely, West has also encountered those who see the value in Black content but offer very little compensation with zero equity or creative control. Compelled by these experiences and inspired by other disruptive startups with proprietary software that are Black owned and that are for the Black community, West launched Culture Forward TV in August 2020, a digital streaming distribution platform that shows content and films from Black filmmakers, Black business owners, Black content creators, and Black educators. Cultivated by West's independent film production and tech development company, Life After Life Productions, Culture Forward TV is currently available on Roku, and will soon be available on Apple TV and Google Chromecast once the mobile app is complete. Still in its Beta phase, Culture Forward TV is creating opportunities, jobs, awareness and influence for Black creatives. Additionally, Culture Forward TV aims at being the first company to incorporate blockchain technology, augmented reality, and smart contracts into film and media. While a Black-owned streaming platform that utilizes smart contracts is not "new," West's grassroots initiative (he does his own coding, programming, and distribution) strengthens a larger movement that's keeping dollars circulating in the Black community, creating equity and ownership opportunities for Black artists, and conferring power and influence to Black creators in the entertainment industry.

Website Instagram

Pictured from left to right: Ruby Lee Dove & Alex West.
Los Angeles, CA. 2018.

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