

August 2015. Vol. 19, No. 3. — Community Cultural Development 2015: Revisiting Our Practice — Bill Flood

BY CULTUREWORK, ON AUGUST 18TH, 2015

Seventeen years ago, Bill Flood, community cultural development facilitator, consultant, and organizer, wrote a ***CultureWork*** article defining community cultural development and how it was understood and practiced at the time. Since then, much has been learned with new questions and implications arising in the field each day. Now, Flood has interviewed professionals from across the field to bring together a sensibility of what is important as conceptions of community cultural development continue to grow and refine itself within the 21st century. Here, we learn current questions, concerns, and opportunities that will guide future directions.

Best regards,
Julie Voelker-Morris
Robert Voelker-Morris
Editors

Community Cultural Development 2015: Revisiting Our Practice

Bill Flood

[The below links will open in a new browser tab or window.]

In 1998 I wrote an **article** for *CultureWork: A Periodic Broadside for Arts and Culture Workers* describing community cultural development and how we practice it. Much has changed since 1998. In this updated article, I describe the current field of community cultural development as seen through the lens of nine practitioners, including myself.

My dear colleagues listed below participated in this article by responding to a set of questions from their widely differing experiences and approaches. My task has been to pull commonalities and learnings from the rich trove of their responses. My hope with this article is to give us a sense of the current climate for community cultural development.

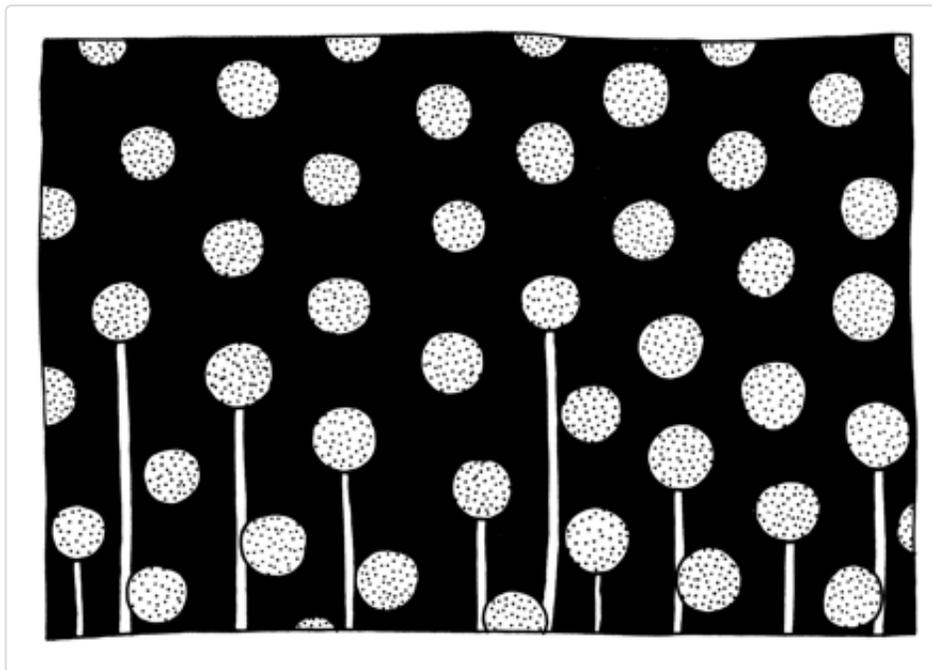
Many thanks to my fellow community cultural development practitioners who participated generously in this project.

- Savannah Barrett, director of programs, **Art of the Rural**
- Roberto Bedoya, writer and Executive Director of the **Tucson Pima Arts Council**
- Doug Blandy, professor, **Arts and Administration, University of Oregon**
- John Fenn, folklorist and assistant professor, **Arts and Administration, University of Oregon**
- Patrick Föhl, founder and director, **Network for Cultural Consulting** (Berlin)

- **Arlene Goldbard**, writer, social activist, consultant whose focus is the intersection of culture, politics, and spirituality
- John Haworth, Senior Executive, **National Museum of the American Indian-Smithsonian Institution New York**
- Celine Vandervlugt, Teen Services, **Cook Memorial Library**, LaGrande Oregon

What gives you joy?

This was one of the final two questions that I posed to contributors. I am beginning this article with their comments because they so clearly identified *why* we do the work of community cultural development. Contributors overwhelmingly described witnessing “cultural connection” as their biggest joy—participating in arts/culture activities; seeing people wholeheartedly in their cultural milieus, people working together for the first time. The fellowship of interesting and engaged people from many backgrounds. The satisfaction of being part of these dialogues, this work and these issues. The sheer beauty and/or magic of cultural experiences. Finding relationships drop into place, watching someone fall in love with a place.



We work in many settings. We are organizers, managers, facilitators, planners, teachers, writers, artists, history buffs, trouble makers, lovers of place and people, advocates for people speaking their languages, practicing their faiths, speaking their truths, and probably most importantly, we seek to be strong listeners. It is *how* we work and how we engage through culture that defines us as cultural workers and practitioners of community cultural development.

What brings you sadness?

Just as we organize and engage people around their assets/strengths we confront what brings them and us sadness. My colleagues listed consistently highlighted “politics”, dwindling funding sources, and lack of support for cultural organizers and all they provide communities as major sources of sadness. Also discussed: aggressiveness, international migration, racism and violence in our country, and lack of empathy and understanding of the underlying economic, social, political, and cultural dynamics behind these, the “business as usual” of working in isolation, and organized attempts to compromise people and culture.

What brings me sadness? Aggression and arrogance of all kinds, our destructive obsession with the automobile, racism demonstrated by both long-standing residents and newcomers to this country, and an

overwhelming disregard for the importance of speaking multiple languages.

What is community cultural development?

Community cultural development describes processes of identifying, supporting and mobilizing local culture toward community betterment. It assumes that culture is active, not passive; we inherit parts of our culture and, as we grow, make other parts anew every day. It also assumes that culture is a *right* for all and not just a *privilege* for a few. It values people telling their own stories, learning and re-learning history, in order to better understand our individual and collective cultures and those of our neighbors.

Writer **Wendell Berry** (1987) described community as a “common dependence on a common life and a common ground” (p. 192). Community can be grounded in place and/or in common interests connecting people in many places. Culture is where we feel most at home and what we feel most strongly about; it gives us identity and meaning. It takes many forms including how we adapt our natural environment, the forms we use to express our social and political beliefs, and, most certainly, all forms of arts, history, heritage, humanities, and language and communication forms. Culture is what we inherit, what we create, and the societal glue that holds us together or tears us apart.

Development suggests movement, change, transformation. I discuss throughout this article our struggles with terminology. For example, *development* is certainly a troublesome word for some, especially with those focused on preservation. “Development” implies, to many people, a top-down change rather than bottom-up, natural, participatory processes, and suggests that something is not right (Blandly). For some, including tribal cultures, “preservation” may be more significant than development. Within community cultural development, the setting of priorities that ultimately happens with development rests with the local community, not with outside forces.

Community cultural development differs in every community based on its people and dynamics. The range of work can be enormous, and no one method leads community cultural development. We employ values and techniques grounded in the context of each community. Understanding that context and engaging, listening, and organizing people within that context is essential (Barrett).

Community cultural development is thus engaging people of a community in taking action to build on and improve their shared culture. If culture is what connects us, then community cultural development is a tool to temper and strengthen that connection.

What is central to your practice? What are you learning?

For many of us, the theory and practices of Brazilian educator **Paulo Freire** (1970) underlie our work. **Listening**, as the first step of problem-posing education (listening – dialogue – action) is key to our practice. Real, active, slow, deliberate listening. Listening to what is most important to people and their struggles. Listening to their languages, how they speak, what they are saying. We listen to the past so that serious healing can occur and seek not to use arts and culture to merely cover wounds. African-American residents of North and Northeast Portland neighborhoods have carried for at least 60 years the scars of displacement from urban renewal. Now, the **Regional Arts and Culture Council** is contracting with African-American artists from these neighborhoods to lead **projects** that tell the stories associated with urban renewal, displacement, and gentrification. Again and again, I learn that real listening is challenging for most of us; even with the best intentions, we are often too quick in our response.

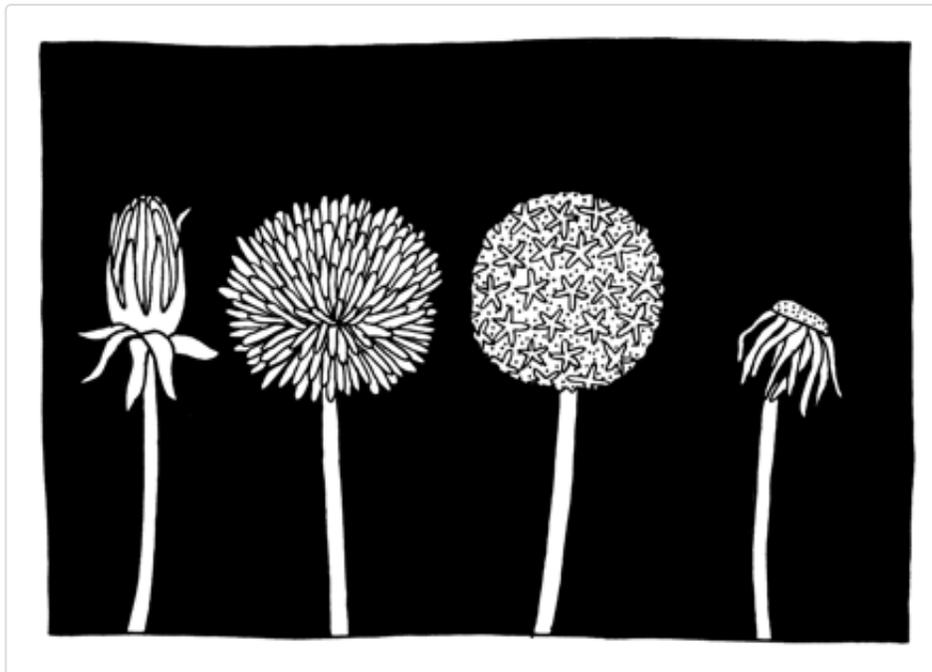
Much of the work of community cultural practitioners is about **collaboration**. Contributors consistently placed high value on the power of community cultural development to bridge and build understanding across sectors. The need to support collaborations cannot be underestimated. The rule of “1+1=3” (Robert Lynch, President and CEO, **Americans for the Arts**) is consistently proven; together we can do more than any two groups operating alone. Lane DeMoll, former Executive Director of **Cart’m Recycling** in Manzanita, Oregon says

“There Ain’t No Other Way”, referring to the power of cross-sector collaborations to sustain our organizations and communities while effecting positive change.

Organizing is central to our practice. My 1998 article focused on the role of individuals (cultural workers) but overlooked the vital role of organizing and organizations in community cultural development. Our history must pay tribute to and learn from organizations such as **Appalshop** (Whitesburg, Kentucky), which has been leading organizing efforts and teaching many of us since 1969. Now a nationally-recognized media center, Appalshop’s philosophy has always been that “Appalachian people must tell their own stories and solve their own problems” (Barrett, 2014, para. 11). And now the **U.S. Department of Arts and Culture** is organizing throughout the nation toward “inciting creativity in the service of empathy, equity, and social imagination” (mission statement).

A leading voice in the rural arts movement in this country, Savannah Barrett noted that: “we will continue to be challenged as organizers until we lift up organizers with very different perspectives from our own, and lift them to the same level as ourselves.”

John Haworth also noted that some large “legacy” cultural organizations are leading transformative work in how they engage the public. For example, the **Public Theater** in New York City (founded by Joseph Papp and also offering **Free Shakespeare in the Park**) has made its mark through an in-depth play development process (which includes extensive script development workshops with playwrights from diverse backgrounds), along with talk-back programs focused on complex social and political issues related to the substantive content of its productions. Their **Public Forum** program presents the “theater of ideas: performances and conversations with leading voices in politics, media, and the arts” (para. 1).



Inescapable **movement**, even if our focus is preserving cultural assets, requires that we accept and embrace change as a given. Resources constantly shift and new opportunities arise. Our internal, external, local, and non-local contexts transform through and around us. Public agencies and foundations we count on for support are often not quick to acknowledge and support change. Knowing this, we must show them how to be stronger stewards of both change and preservation of local cultures.

Conflict is difficult for some of us. The struggle with how to acknowledge, understand, and utilize the dynamics of confrontation and conflict is ongoing in my practice. Ignoring conflicts, no less their transformative potential, is not fair to those we serve.

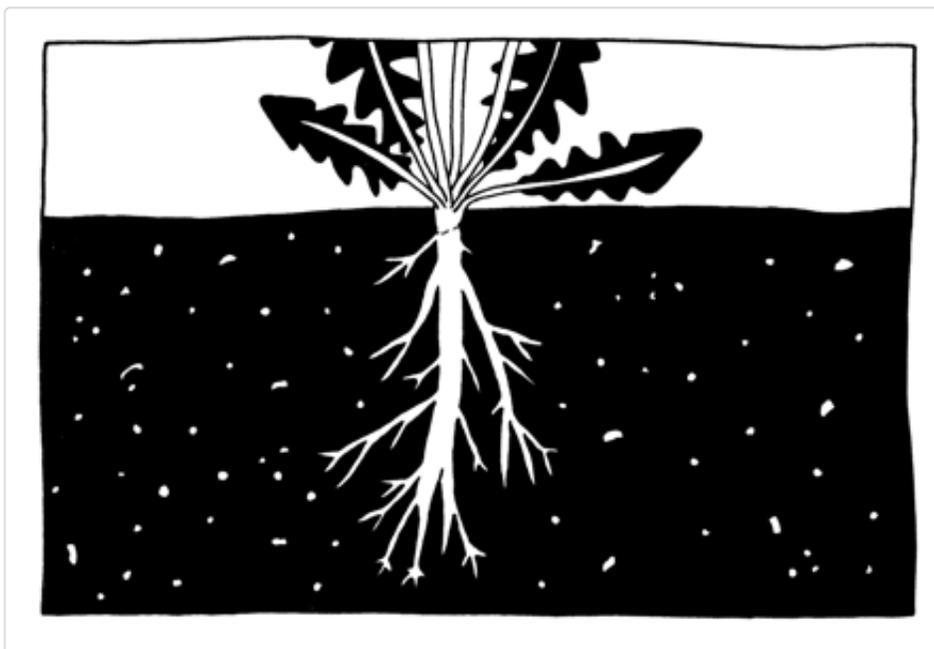
Language is key. Contributors to this article consistently discussed the challenges posed by the terms we use to describe our work and, ultimately, came down on the necessity of seeking common vocabulary. The variety of terms include cultural work, community arts work, cultural practice, social practice, community organizing, animating communities, social justice work, reconciliation, and creative place-making. My friend John Haworth summarized for us: “the cultural field is a big world, enormously diverse in its practice, temperament, priorities and values. Indeed, some terms (e.g., “quality”) are used as a tool for exclusion and to minimize the cultural practices in diverse communities. Our field needs to understand on deeper levels ways of assessing/evaluating such subjective terms, going deeper into the quality of the community engagement, the depth and extent of visitor/audience participation.” **Animating Democracy**, A Program of Americans for the Arts, has developed resources to help us consider **evaluating the social impact of the arts**.

I often ask students and group meeting participants not to use acronyms as they ultimately exclude those not in the “know” (often me) from conversation. I mention this to illustrate how easy it is to include or exclude people through our language.

Community cultural development requires an **understanding of politics**—the politics of elected government and the cultural politics within a community. The global political dynamics of complex issues; for example, environmental and social justice issues, competitive pressures within funding communities, and program pressures that artists, emerging, mid-level, discipline-specific, large and legacy cultural organizations all face (Haworth). Roberto Bedoya (2013) also reminded us of the importance of understanding the politics of “dis-belonging” in our society. This all points to the necessity of understanding how power and resources are distributed in any given community and the relationships that make up that community.

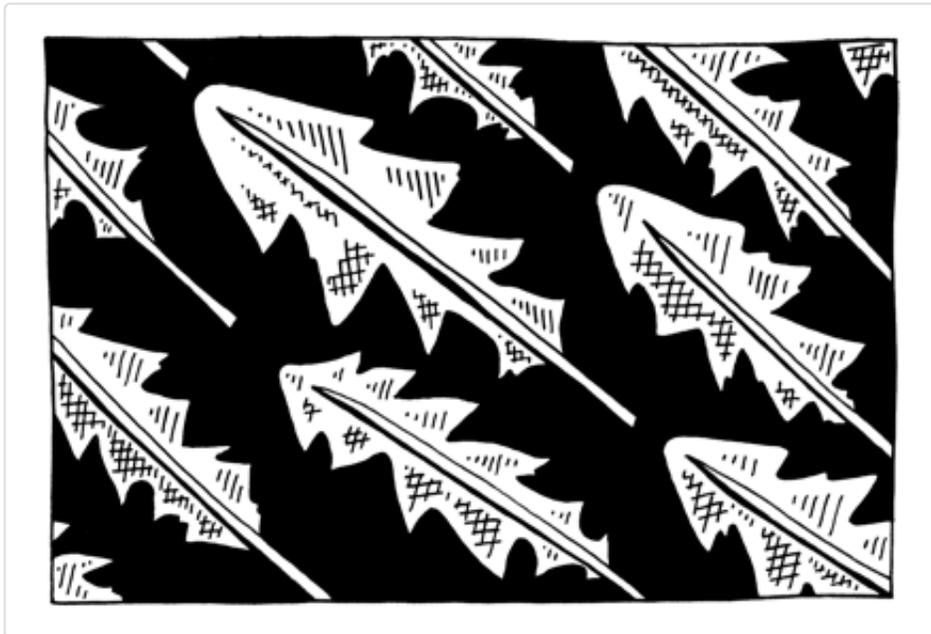
Why is community cultural development important? What does it offer?

In a meeting with rural constituents, the director of a state economic development agency I worked with said that the only long-lasting economic development strategies are ones rooted in the culture of that place. I am also reminded of my dear friend, folk artist and curandera/healer **Eva Castellanoz** from Nyssa, Oregon. Asked to say a few words at the beginning of a statewide arts summit, she pulled a large dandelion from her purse and held it up. The root of the dandelion is what gives the plant strength, she said, and *that* is our culture. When our roots are strong, we are strong; when our roots are weak, we are weak.



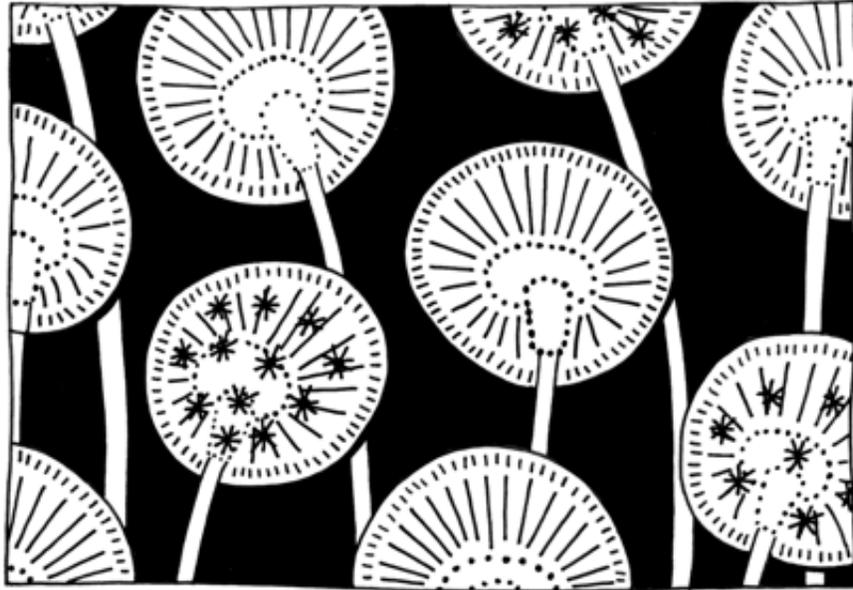
The framework of community cultural development is important. It enables practitioners to continually reflect on and improve our practice. It is, for students and newcomers to the field, the history, values, and techniques of community cultural development. It gives those involved with planning other areas of community life (for example, human services, housing and economic development, education, and urban planning) ways to ensure that culture is part of all conversations. It also provides common ground and strategies for practitioners and scholars from a variety of cultural disciplines including arts management, media management, community arts, arts education and youth arts education, curatorial and museum studies, social practice, folklore, heritage, historic preservation, and humanities.

Asserting “culture” into community development conversations in communities opens up opportunities and possibilities. For more than 25 years, I have been the planner in the room representing “culture” in planning and development conversations with a wide variety of urban planning, housing, economic development, transportation, and other planners. I am usually met with openness and often, genuine excitement. Bringing arts and culture into community development conversations is most often an inspiring breath of fresh air and a hopeful way of thinking and engaging people. Often, I find that urban planners are generally very attracted to notions of creative place-making (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). While creative place-making can be a point of entry for discussion, I and other community cultural development practitioners have been skeptical of the use of creative place-making to really imply prettying up a place with plazas, public art, benches, colored bricks, and flower baskets. I am much more attracted to community activists Jenny Lee’s and Roberto Bedoya’s notion of *placekeeping* (Bedoya, 2014) with its emphasis on strong connection with, and respect for, the cultural memory of local people.



How do you approach your work as a practitioner of community cultural development? What is central to your practice?

Community cultural developers are bridge people—connecting people, institutions, organizations, and communities, creating collaborations. While respecting what is traditional and important to people, we also seek to shake things up, bringing new ways of thought and action to communities and cultures. Patrick Föhl summed it up with his contribution to this article: “see, listen, learn and then structure the obvious and new”. Patrick and Gernot Wolfram (both from Berlin, Germany) described successful cultural managers as “masters of interspaces” working with and between a multitude of local issues, organizations, and people. Savannah Barrett voiced an almost identical role for community cultural development projects to “become cultivators for the kind of interactions that fill divided space and begin to solve problems.”



What are the most critical issues? What are our greatest barriers/limitations?

Contributors consistently cited the issue and barrier of little (if any) conversation as a nation around cultural policy and the politics behind this lack of conversation. There is no consistent message that cultural expression is a vital right. Our assertion that cultural expression is our *essence* and our *right* needs be clear and consistent. It is not a frill, an add-on, a once-a-year show in the community gallery. Other issues and barriers discussed by contributors:

- Building common language, especially as we seek to stimulate cross-sector partnerships and work.
- For Arlene Goldbard, racism, climate change, and wealth inequality are the big three issues; “if we don’t connect the little local story with the big global story, we’re irrelevant.”
- Identifying funding for staff positions to carry on this work is always challenging.
- Dominance by mainstream media remains a huge issue.
- Lack of acknowledgement for inequities, our histories, our past, drags with us.
- Evaluation and assessment procedures, tools, and related thinking have not progressed to the point of clearly identifying value for cultural expression. We are often forced to quantify when we cannot.
- Time is a barrier for many.

What are our greatest opportunities?

Opportunities always exist in this field; that is the good news. It is very difficult to imagine a community, a place, a people without cultural assets to build upon. Contributors were unanimous here. Other key opportunities include:

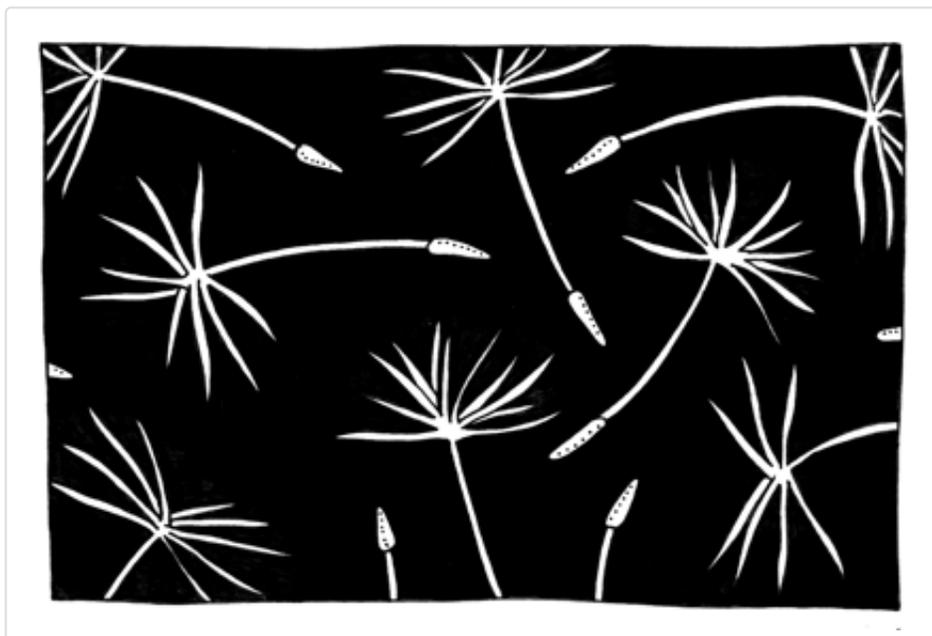
- An increased focus on equity within arts/culture in the United States provides important context and foundation for our work (multiple contributors).
- Many cultural organizations are showing stronger commitment to engagement with audiences; we are all about engagement and can partner here.
- Dialogue and debate around terminology and practices can provide huge learning for us all.
- Social media, web-based resources, and community-based media offer opportunity, often as organizing tools. **Appalshop**, described earlier, can teach us all about organizing community-based media.
- Some federal agencies are aligning resources to invest in creative place-making, and philanthropy is

buzzing with renewed interest in culture and quality of life. The arts are very significant partners with other areas such as economic development and health care. (Barrett)

- We have a huge repertoire of experience to draw from, including: artists and cultural workers doing strong, important work; resource organizations including the earlier **Alliance for Cultural Democracy** and current **Animating Democracy** as well as **Imagining America** and **U.S. Department of Arts and Culture**; experienced teachers/mentors and prolific writers including contributors Arlene Goldbard and Roberto Bedoya; and other models of cultural work outside the United States
- The local artisans/makers movement in Portland, Oregon and other cities in the United States are bridging the gap between cultural consumers and makers. Organizations in Portland including **ADX: Art Design Portland** and **Independent Publishing Resource Center** are quite serious about busting the myth that culture belongs only to a few. Charles Heying (2010), Portland State University Professor and devoted artisan economy researcher and writer, identified the qualities of artisan products as: handmade, designed to age, locally distinct, appreciated (often aesthetically as well as functionally), and egalitarian (accessible to many, if not all). These qualities correspond well with values within the field of community cultural development. The paradox of this positive focus on the local artisan economy is the unfortunate trend for makers and artists to be priced out of neighborhoods, especially in Portland.
- Our work is truly multidisciplinary and requires the desire and skills to successfully collaborate. We can definitely lead here.

What's next?

With or without the named practice of community cultural development, dedicated individuals and groups will continue to support local culture toward creating more resilient and humane communities. Naming and claiming the practice allows us to improve our individual and group practices and collectively work to dismantle barriers to cultural expression. As the seeds blow, we are ready to support in all sorts of ways to make our collective roots strong.



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Many thanks to:

- Fellow community development practitioners who contributed to this article (listed on page 1)

- Eva Castellanoz for her wisdom and inspiration around our roots of culture
- **Jillian Barthold**, illustrator
- Cassandra Kelly, editor
- Julie Voelker-Morris and Robert Voelker-Morris, *CultureWork* editors

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Bill Flood

I spend a lot of time (25 plus years) thinking about and working with the intersections between culture and community, and how to identify, support, and utilize what we hold most dear (our cultures) in creating and sustaining more humane and truly livable places. For more information about my teaching and program development with the University of Oregon Arts and Administration Program you can go to <https://aad.uoregon.edu/faculty/bill-flood>; for more about my professional community cultural development consulting practice you can go to <http://www.billflood.org>. I thank everyone who takes the time to read this article and encourage you to send me feedback at flood@uoregon.edu.

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