



September 22, 2022

Dear Pablo Raphael de la Madrid, Vianka Santana, and Ricardo Castillo López:

RE: NACDI Recommendations for MONDIACULT 2022

In September 2022 the North American Cultural Diplomacy Initiative (NACDI) organized Revisioning Culture for Cultural Policy, a series of three virtual public open mic conversations. These events aim to expand the conversation on cultural policy in the lead up to the [UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – MONDIACULT 2022](#). The events were also part of a larger series of [Virtual Global Open Mics titled Share Your Voice](#), organized in partnership with International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies, the Tijuana Cultural Center CECUT, the Universidad Panamericana, and the Universidad Iberoamericana.

Over the course of three events, we brought expert scholars and practitioners into conversation with moderator drawn from NACDI. These pairings included Azeezah Kanji (Noor Cultural Centre) and Dr. Sascha Priewe (Aga Khan Museum); Dr. Justin O'Connor (University of Southern Australia) and Dr. Sarah E.K. Smith (Western University); and Kelly Langgard (Ontario Arts Council) and Ben Schnitzer (Queen's University). Each conversation focused on a different facet of culture and cultural policy, addressing epistemological issues with culture and decolonizing, problem framing and the role of cultural policy today, as well as policy entrepreneurship and global challenges.

Creating a forum for wide open conversation on culture and cultural policies, these open mics drew a global audience, with participants including scholars, practitioners and members of the public. We are grateful to all of our contributors for their valuable additions to the discussion. Out of these wide-ranging conversations, we put forth the following recommendations to Mondiacult 2022, advocating that the meeting take into account and reflect on the following principles.

Challenge the myth of culture's neutrality. As Azeezah Kanji urged us: "The discussions about terms like 'culture,' far from being abstract academic matters, are in fact necessary interrogations of the epistemological knowledge frameworks that continue to justify exercises of genocidal and dispositive violence against Indigenous peoples and non-human animals."

Acknowledge that there are **diverse cultures**, which are not all national cultures based in the state system. This methodological nationalism curtails possibilities for cultural policy.

Culture must be taken seriously, as a factor worth considering outside of economic metrics. Justin O'Connor emphasized this in his comments, noting this is due to the very narrow economistic definition of culture that dominates the UNESCO narrative. As O'Connor explains, statist discussions of culture are embedded in economic frameworks and "...economics cannot do the calculations [about culture]." According to O'Connor, this approach mitigates against a "very expansive idea of culture: culture as a way of life... and ...culture as a system where we produce 'stuff' that we call culture." In other words, the potential for culture to enact social cohesion and to guide us to truly sustainable global public development is not possible when only economic metrics are employed. As O'Connor notes: "How can you talk about gender equality or food security without [talking about] culture?" Thus, we cannot be naive about "giving" culture to the market.

In advancing cultural policy it is important to question orthodoxy, challenge Eurocentrism and interrogate privilege. Western approaches to culture, divorce it from nature, despite numerous other worldviews in which believe in ontological continuity between the human and natural world. This was emphasized in our first open mic discussion on the nature-culture divide. Kanji noted, the UNESCO definition of culture privileges Western universalist thought, treating it as *distinct* from nature: "Western thought and philosophy...elevated to the realm of the universal ... the philosophical, political, intellectual and legal traditions of the Indigenous and the colonized are relegated to the realm of the particular...as mere metaphor." The problem, as discussed by our participants, is that this limits our understanding, precluding "...any real [potential]...to fundamentally reconsider, to rethink, to reorganize, to reorder our relationships with each other and with other beings in the world...in a just and sustainable way."

Cultural policy is an important venue in which to advance decolonizing. Here, as Kathleen Darby suggests, we can consider the potential of culture: **"It seems to me that the act of creativity, in its many guises, may provide ways that we can actually address colonization and colonial thought as well as other threats to our society."**

We need to **open discussions of cultural policy broadly to many actors and different viewpoints.** As Kelly Langgard urged, we need to "...think a lot more about who is *not* at the table...we need to think about who we *aren't* engaged with." Ben Schnitzer recommended we think about this as "shared ownership" of cultural policy. A range of actors are necessary according to Joyce Zemans. She explained: "Yes...you need policy entrepreneurs. You need the leaders in the field. You need the people who are going to stand up and write and

influence...but without cultural activists [working on behalf of communities] we're nowhere in terms of policy making." Other participants urged us to also consider cultural workers as a key part of any cultural policy process. Meghan Lindsay asked: how do we reconcile issues of labour and precarity at the individual [cultural worker] level?" And, O'Connor also noted: "Unless you care for [cultural workers] as the makers of culture, whatever nice words you have for culture as a public good will count for little." **Opening up policy making processes will challenge entrenched notions of who makes cultural policy, thus offering new possibilities.** This includes challenging the dominance of state-based approaches. Policy development does not always need to be state based; it needs to move beyond the nation-state to scale to different levels on a local global continuum.

By bringing in a range of voices and perspectives—including those not typically engaged in problem framing and policymaking, **we suggest that policy and culture should be a process rather than an end.** Thus, the work of Mondiacult 2022 should be a means rather than an end.

We look forward to seeing how these recommendations help to shape the occasion of Mondiacult 2022.

Jeffrey Brison, Lynda Jessup, & Sarah E.K. Smith
On behalf of the [North American Cultural Diplomacy Initiative](https://culturaldiplomacyinitiative.com)