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An Interview with National Leaders in the Arts and Humanities

Horacio Sierra 

Department of Language, Literature, & Cultural Studies, Bowie State University, Bowie, MD, USA
Email: hsierra@bowiestate.edu

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Abstract

The President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH) has played a significant role in American government since its establishment by President Reagan in 1982. Although not part of the President's Cabinet, the PCAH serves as an advisory body directly appointed by the president to support and promote arts and humanities across the nation. Despite its non-partisan mission, the PCAH has not been immune to political turmoil. In 2017, following President Trump's controversial comments on the Charlottesville violence, the PCAH members resigned en masse, leading to the committee's temporary disbandment. President Biden reinstated the PCAH in 2022, emphasizing its importance in fostering civic engagement, social cohesion, and equity through the arts and humanities. This article features an interview with current PCAH members, including National Endowment for the Humanities Chair Shelly C. Lowe, Oscar- and Tony-award winner and PCAH Co-Chair Bruce Cohen, and PCAH member and interdisciplinary artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya. The discussion highlights their personal and professional journeys within the arts and humanities, underscoring the profound impact of cultural experiences on their lives. They advocate for continued government support, citing the arts and humanities as essential for a functioning democracy.

Keywords: humanities; arts; president; government; United States of America; government funding; President Biden; interview; personal narratives; arts impact; transformation; art projects; Lady Gaga; National Endowment for the Humanities; Bruce Cohen; committee

1. PCAH and its historic role in American government

Although he was a prolific film actor during Hollywood's Golden Age, U.S. President Ronald Reagan is not typically associated with robust government support for the arts and humanities. However, it was President Reagan who launched the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH) in 1982. During the September 14, 2023 meeting of the PCAH, Rachel Goslin, PCAH's Executive Director from 2009 to 2015 under President Barack Obama, revealed how some in Washington's political circles described the origin of the PCAH to her:

When I became director of the President's Committee, I heard a couple different stories about the origins of this committee from people who had been here a lot longer than I had. First, I was told President Reagan, who created this committee in 1982, was such a big a fan and advocate for the arts, obviously because of his background, that he wanted

to create a new unit within the government that would increase the power of arts and humanities. Great.

And then a little bit later I was told, actually, kind of the opposite – he loved the arts but wasn't a big fan of government funding for the arts, so he created the President's Committee with a mandate to do private fundraising as a way to ultimately render the NEA and the NEH obsolete. Okay.

And then several years later... [Barabara] Sinatra's [auto]biography came out. And in it there was a little aside where she mentioned how annoyed she was that Nancy Reagan had a huge crush on Frank Sinatra, so much so that she got her husband to create this ridiculous committee on the arts, so that he would appoint Frank, and then Frank would stay with them at the White House when he came for committee meetings.

So we will never know which of those stories is in fact true. But in many ways, I think it is a metaphor for this committee, which is fundamentally changeable. It has been many things to many different administrations, and at different moments in history.¹

Goslin's remarks remind us that the second-wave feminist maxim that the personal is political has always been true. Presidents and their first ladies are as wise and as fallible as the everyday citizens they lead.

While the president appoints the chairs of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), with Congress approving the appointments and funding the agencies, neither the NEA nor the NEH holds a place in the President's Cabinet. The PCAH exists as a unique entity in that it advises the president, similar to the President's Cabinet as described in Article II, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. In contrast to the departments that make up the President's Cabinet, the PCAH's director and members are appointed solely at the president's discretion, without congressional approval. In some ways, the PCAH, which is advisory in nature, is the closest the United States comes to having a Ministry of Culture.

Amid the seemingly never-ending election cycles, the PCAH finds itself in a unique position: it is composed of political appointees but is tasked with supporting and uplifting a politically polarized nation through the arts and humanities, regardless of political affiliation. Artists and humanists, like all laborers, cannot help but have their work influenced by their political ideologies, however objective they strive to be. The balance between fostering ecumenical advocacy for the unquantifiable value of the arts and humanities and encouraging political activism that leads to policies that financially support the arts and humanities is delicate and precarious. Nonetheless, the PCAH has endeavored to carry out its mission while remaining above the partisan fray even though it originated in the White House. If nothing else, PCAH's importance lies in its ability to be nimbler and more flexible than Congressionally funded agencies such as the NEA and NEH.

¹ 74th Meeting of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, Day Two 2023.

The PCAH's importance as a federally mandated committee that represents the political climate as much as it does the artistic and scholarly environment of the nation underscores its ability to change its focus and adjust its voice from one administration to the next. And so, after convening under Republican and Democratic presidents alike (with each president's spouse serving as the Honorary Chair), the PCAH has launched or collaborated on community service projects such as Turnaround Arts, the National Student Poets Program, and Save America's Treasures with much acclaim and little criticism.

Until 2017.

Following the August 12, 2017, death of Heather Heyer, a counter-protester of the white supremacist Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, President Trump asserted that there were "very fine people" on both sides, each of which he blamed for the violence.² Within a week, the PCAH resigned in protest. In a scathing letter that warmed the hearts of many English teachers because it used the first letter of each paragraph to form an acrostic spelling of the word "resist," the PCAH explained that continuing to serve under Trump would entail "ignoring [his] hateful rhetoric" and make them "complicit in [his] words and actions."³ In response, Trump opted not to renew the Executive Order that created the PCAH, breaking a streak of bipartisan support for the PCAH that had lasted more than thirty-five years. Saving face by claiming Trump was planning to disband the committee before it resigned, the White House issued a statement praising the PCAH for its previous efforts but dismissing its existence because it was "not a responsible way to spend American tax dollars."⁴ The critique of the committee's financial support from the federal government is a common refrain from many right-wing activists, pundits, and politicians.

However, there are elected officials who are more informed about the positive economic impact the arts and humanities have on American society. In 2021, 18 members of Congress wrote a letter to President Joe Biden asking him to re-establish the PCAH. In their letter, they noted that

the coronavirus pandemic has devastated the creative economy. During the peak of the pandemic, more than 2 million jobs and \$150 billion in goods and services were lost from our creative industries. We know that this critical sector can contribute up to 4.5 percent of our national GDP, and the arts and culture also serve a transformational role in our communities.⁵

When Biden reinstated the PCAH in 2022, he noted that the country's "creative and cultural economy" is strengthened by "enhancing and expanding opportunities for artists, humanities scholars, students, educators, and cultural heritage practitioners."⁶ Biden's executive order does not explicitly call for private partnerships as Reagan's founding order did when it stated that the committee would "assist in efforts to increase private sector support for the arts and the humanities."⁷ Instead, Biden's order attempts to invoke an inclusive vision that transcends competing political ideologies about the government's role

² Thrush and Haberman 2017.

³ Dovere 2017.

⁴ Pogrebin 2017.

⁵ Bonamici 2021.

⁶ Federal Register 2022.

⁷ Reagan Library n.d.

in supporting artists and humanists: “[M]y Administration will strengthen our Nation’s democracy, increase civic engagement and public service, bolster social cohesion, and advance the cause of equity and accessibility by lifting up more – and more diverse – voices and experiences through Federal support for the arts, the humanities, and museum and library services.”⁸

2. A search for meaning

What is the purpose and significance of the PCAH in a pluralistic nation where federal policies change with each new presidential administration? What role does the government truly play in a poet conjuring metaphors or a scholar dedicating a decade of their professional life to archival research? As I often ask my students, “So what? What is the purpose of your writing? How does your research contribute to humanity’s progress? How is your poem or master’s thesis more than just a reflection of your intellectual interests and emotional cadence?”

As a member of PCAH, I am privileged to ask such questions alongside the nation’s leaders in the arts and humanities, including cultural icons such as Lady Gaga, PCAH’s Co-Chair; community college advocates such as Santa Rosa Junior College President Angélica García; Grammy Award-winning artists such as Jon Batiste; museum curators such as Nora Halpern; and groundbreaking scholars such as Pauline Yu, founding chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Irvine.

The Biden administration’s commitment to ensuring the PCAH is helmed by visionary leaders was made clear when Tsione Wolde-Michael was appointed as its Executive Director. Wolde-Michael’s work collaborating with local art and history museums in Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Africa, and the United Kingdom to reinterpret colonial collections led to her becoming the founding Director of the Center for Restorative History at the National Museum of American History. Indeed, the PCAH is a committee where theory meets practice and luminaries from various fields come together to fulfill a mission statement that advises the president to support the arts and humanities’ ability to foster the “joy, resilience, and connection that are vital to the human experience.”

And so in the midst of PCAH planning 2023’s Juneteenth Jubilee celebration at the White House and launching various projects with the NEA, NEH, and Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), I convened a conversation with three of my PCAH colleagues to discuss the role the arts and humanities have played in their personal and professional lives, as well as their perspectives and hopes for government support of the arts and humanities.

This conversation included Bruce Cohen, PCAH’s Co-Chair, who won an Oscar for producing *American Beauty* and a Tony for producing *The Inheritance*; Shelly C. Lowe, Chair of the NEH, who was the former Executive Director of the Harvard University Native American Program; and Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, a transdisciplinary artist whose work has graced the cover of *Time* magazine and been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Chinese in America, and the Library of Congress. Our conversation reflects our personal views and does not necessarily represent the PCAH, IMLS, or the U.S. Government.

⁸ Federal Register 2022.

3. Personal and professional connections

In the humanities, the NEH is revered for its ability to support the study and practice of the humanities for teachers, scholars, and students from Pre-K through post-graduate life and beyond. Its grants to students, scholars, and institutes provide the financial support that helps update textbooks, enhance teachers' pedagogical strategies, and launch community-building projects. The heavy lifting the NEH does requires a leader who can contextualize short-term demands within the framework of a long-term vision. Few in our field were surprised when President Biden appointed Lowe to head the NEH. As an Agency Principal who works with the PCAH, those of us who serve on various working groups within the PCAH often look to Lowe for guidance on various projects.

When we began our conversation, we were all surprised to learn that Lowe did not always see herself as someone who would work in the humanities. In fact, she started at the University of Arizona as a math major but switched to sociology and American Indian studies after failing calculus.

"Suddenly, everything about academia shifted for me. For the first time, I was introduced to knowledge tools I could use to understand where I had grown up, the Navajo Reservation, and why it was so different from non-reservation areas," Lowe explained. "Whole worlds opened up: worlds full of other experiences, languages, of artistry, of meaning making. The humanities, though I wouldn't have called them that at the time, were setting me down paths I never knew existed, paths I still travel today."

The connection Lowe described between her studies in the humanities and her ability to learn more about herself and her community struck a chord with all of us. Her perspective made me reflect on the cultural encounters I experienced while growing up in Miami, Florida's tri-lingual landscape of Spanish, English, and Haitian Creole. It seemed normal to me to be taken on a field trip to see a sixteenth-century play from Spain performed in a community theater one week and then line up to get my copy of the Haitian-inspired *Feast of All Saints* signed by the New Orleans-based writer Anne Rice during the Miami Book Fair the following week.

Such childhood memories were a recurring theme during our conversation. Phingbodhipakkiya discussed how, as a child, she was inspired by the work of a fellow Asian American artist without knowing she was experiencing the work of someone who would later serve as a muse and role model for her own work.

"My parents often took me to Atlanta's Piedmont Park, where I was inexplicably drawn to a geometric playscape. I didn't know at the time, and I doubt my parents did either, that this playground was designed by Isamu Noguchi, an artist whose mastery of space and form I deeply respect," Phingbodhipakkiya recollected. "Now, as an adult, I feel a profound connection with Noguchi, an Asian American artist like myself, whose work underscores the necessity of public art and the need for our practices to center care and connection for our communities."

Cohen excitedly joined the chorus affirming how important it was to experience free and affordable public arts and humanities projects as a child.

"My sister and I were exposed to the most beautiful variety of living cultural heritage from all over the world every summer during the Smithsonian Folk Festival. I will never forget

hearing the a cappella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock there for the first time as a teenager, inspiring a lifelong love of both gospel and choral music. Or when my parents took me to see *Fiddler on the Roof*, my first stage musical, at the National Theater in DC when I was 3!” Cohen exclaimed. “It inspired a lifelong love of theater. Currently serving on the Board of the extraordinary Broadway Inspirational Voices gospel choir and being a Tony Award-winning Broadway producer both speak to how influential these experiences truly were in my life.”

Our shared affirmation of how impactful it was to experience such influential cultural artifacts as children and college students infused us with energy. But what filled us with hope was the reminder of how the art and humanities projects we share with the public not only plant seeds of inspiration that may not bear fruit until after we are gone, but also serve as the clarion of someone’s calling as an artist, scholar, or architect.

Phingbodhipakkiya summed up our feelings succinctly when she said, “Noguchi passed away the year I was born, yet through his work – the vessels of play and exploration he left behind – his ideas and influence were very much alive to me.”

We shared further stories about the way artistic pieces and humanities projects have inspired our work as budding artists, engaged citizens, and policymakers. In a nod to post-modernism’s call to erase the evaluative distinctions between “high” and “low” culture and Stuart Hall’s watershed work as a cultural studies rhetorician who invited academics to embrace popular culture, our references covered the spectrum. We discussed with fondness, gratitude, and vigor works such as the Norwegian folk tale *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, the NEH-funded *The Power of Children* exhibition at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, Bill Brand’s New York City subway public art series *Masstransiscope*, the naming of Miami’s SW 8 Street as Celia Cruz Way, Lewis Hyde’s thought-provoking treatise *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*, Madonna’s music videos, and the oral histories of the Library of Congress-archived StoryCorps Project.

4. Funding sources and threats for the arts and humanities

But lurking on the periphery of this animated discussion was the tangible threat posed by those who seek to censor the free exchange of ideas and restrict the unfettered creation and distribution of art that has made this country the creative and prosperous powerhouse it is. In a nation where books are regularly banned from public school libraries and K-12 curricula focusing on the enslavement of Black Americans or women’s and gender studies have been whitewashed and dismantled, a fierce culture war is being waged over the value of the humanities and the role of educators in shaping students’ minds.

This threat is most palpable when it pertains to a public or government source – be it a public school, a county library, or a federal grant. Steering our conversation toward these concerns, I played the devil’s advocate by asking, “The arts is a trillion-dollar industry that represents 4.4% of the country’s GDP. Humanities research is conducted by scholars at colleges, libraries, and museums. Why do you think the government should support the arts and humanities with funding and resources at the local, state, and federal levels?”

As we pondered how to answer such a delicate question, Lowe, no doubt accustomed to defending the humanities, stopped us in our tracks with her eloquence:

Simply put, we cannot as a society afford to do without the humanities. But the humanities themselves are not profit centers. The value they create does not come from something that can be bought or sold. And none of the individuals we depend on to add to our country's wealth of humanities information and institutions – our scholars, curators, filmmakers, archivists, educators, and researchers – enter their respective fields from a desire for wealth or fame.

Lowe noted that countless artists and scholars pursue their work because they see it as a calling that fulfills a higher purpose. Cohen, keen on seeing how PCAH's projects can help combat what United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy called the nation's epidemic of loneliness and isolation, added, "You can take any and every issue facing us in America right now, and it would be demonstrably helped in some way by the arts and the humanities being properly funded."

Emboldened by Cohen's and Lowe's noble views of why the government should support public art and humanities programs, Phingbodhipakkiya looked to our past to envision a more cohesive and inclusive form of government support for artists and humanists. Citing the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA) employment of "tens of thousands of artists, artists, writers, historians, reporters, and editors to create art and capture the stories and histories of people from every state in the union" during the Great Depression, Phingbodhipakkiya outlined five initiatives she would love to see in a dream scenario where the federal government had unlimited funds at its disposal. These would include: 1. Long-Term Residencies and Fellowships. 2. Community Arts Hubs. 3. Flexible Funding Models. 4. Artist-Led Program Development. 5. Purpose-Driven Public Art.

Phingbodhipakkiya rhapsodized about what these initiatives would look like. As someone who has attended creative writing workshops at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center and participated in NEH-financed workshops and conferences, I joined in by thinking about the logistical implications of initiatives that made funding more accessible and equitable. We dreamt about what could be under ideal circumstances and imagined what President Franklin D. Roosevelt would say about our current political climate.

5. Arts and humanities as essential components of a functioning democracy

Knowing that a few hundred votes in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Nevada, and Arizona in this year's presidential election could lead to the PCAH's demise, several of us wondered about how we could fulfill our mission statement's credo affirming that "the arts and humanities as essential pillars of a democratic society."

Ever the balm for our worries, Lowe reminded us of the similarities between our committee and the NEH and the NEA:

The PCAH mission statement echoes the words of the members of Congress who proposed the creation of both the NEH and the NEA. The 1965 legislation that established our two federal agencies declares, "Democracy demands wisdom and vision in its citizens," and draws a direct line between the robust support for the arts and humanities and the health of our democracy.

Reflecting on the impact of expression, archiving, and storytelling as dynamic agents of change, Phingbodhipakkiya invoked the bold words of our Revolutionary predecessors: “The arts and humanities are declarations of the will of the people. They challenge power, imagine futures, and unearth too often overlooked stories. The proliferation of these perspectives ensures that we are a nation grounded in the voices and wishes of the people.”

“Exactly!” agreed Cohen. “Without the arts and the humanities, we would not be the United States of America and we would certainly not be a democracy.”

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