

FREEDOM MAPS



**ACTIVATING LEGACIES OF
CULTURE, ART, AND ORGANIZING
IN THE U.S. SOUTH**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. South is the country's most populated region, yet it is also the most underfunded and overlooked. According to the National Center for Responsive Philanthropy, between 2010 and 2014 the South received \$41 in foundation funding per person, compared to the national funding rate of \$451 per person and the New York state rate of \$995 per person.¹ These figures represent a stark disinvestment, especially when coupled with other harsh realities the region faces: economic injustice, extractive industry development, the impacts of climate change, food inequality, mass incarceration, and the opioid epidemic, to name a few.²

Yet the South is also a place of great opportunity, with a strong legacy of innovation born out of necessity. From the past to the present, Southerners have cultivated creative ways to persevere, particularly those who are the most marginalized. From Black and indigenous peoples' histories of marronage, to the formation and maintenance of social aid and pleasure clubs, the South is rich with stories that demonstrate the role that arts and culture have played in the survival of Southern people.

A national grantmaking organization originally commissioned this report in fall 2017 to better understand the current state of artistic practice in the South; the health of arts and culture infrastructure in the South; and the ways in which artists and culture workers are helping to build progressive infrastructure through their efforts at the intersections of arts, culture, and social justice.³ In 2019 with the support of new partners, Ignite Arts Dallas at Southern Methodist University and Alternate Roots, we initiated a second stage of research to update the data, conduct additional interviews, and fill some gaps from the first phase of the report. We examined national data sets, conducted 41 interviews with artists and those who support them, and facilitated community visioning sessions in four locations across the region.⁴

Throughout our process, we tried to find balance between the nonprofit arts and cultural landscape, on which our quantitative research primarily focuses, and the fact that much of the creative work happening throughout the South

1. Schlegel, Ryan and Peng, Stephanie. *As the South Grows: On Fertile Soil*. National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. 2017.

2. DeSilver, Drew. "Who's poor in America? 50 years into the 'War on Poverty,' a data portrait." Pew Research Center, 2014. <http://pewrsr.ch/1cWtBk1>

3. In this study, the South includes: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Our definition aligns closely with the census definition, and even more closely with that of Alternate ROOTS.

4. See Appendix A of the full report for more information on our methodology.

occurs in other formations. Our interviews and vision circles particularly focused on work that could be described as community-based. Expanding further, there are vibrant communities of artists and cultural workers who operate in a variety of forms and contexts outside of these arenas – from for-profit businesses (e.g., galleries, studios, clubs, festivals), to larger-budget institutions, to unincorporated collectives, to front porches. While our research suggests that Southern organizations that receive most of the arts and culture dollars mirror national trends – are larger-budget, center Western European fine art forms, have audiences that tend to be white, urban, and formally educated – further research is needed to shed light on how these dynamics play out in the South and how broader creative and artistic practices intersect and diverge with the nonprofit arts ecosystem.



FOUR KEY FINDINGS

1. LEGACY:

Southerners understand the inextricable link between art, culture and social justice work, building on long traditions of cultural organizing in the South.

Practitioners consistently name the lineages in which they are working, honor the community institutions that continue to steward these histories, and tell under-told stories of the ways that the South has integrated cultural work into movements for justice. These social and economic justice struggles are ongoing, and arts-based change work and cultural organizing remain critically important tools today.

2. HYBRIDITY:

Hybrid art practices, intersectional analysis, and multiple geographies of community accountability are core components of the ways in which Southern artists pursue work that integrates art, culture, and social justice.

Artists are working to address myriad justice issues, which they understand

as interrelated. It's hard to address the opioid epidemic in rural communities without tackling challenges of geographic isolation and lack of transportation infrastructure. Artists engaged in justice work must play multiple roles in their home communities and adapt their practices and analysis – crossing genres, locales, and often-siloed issue areas.

3. DIVESTMENT:

When it comes to arts and culture, the South is the least well-funded region of the U.S.

In 2017, a person living in the South received only \$4.21 in arts and culture funding from philanthropy, compared to the national average of \$8.60 per person. This ongoing lack of investment has created a formalized nonprofit infrastructure that practitioners perceive as weak and inattentive to local needs and realities of Southern artists and communities. Consequently, artists and culture workers often operate outside of traditional structures and spaces.

4. SOLIDARITY:

Southern artists have created solidarity economies in response to entrenched structures of oppression and the chronic lack of philanthropic and public investment in local cultural organizations and artists.

These alternative systems of mutual support, resource sharing, and collaboration build on longstanding Southern traditions – e.g., Black-run cooperatives, feeding people from the church annex – and reflect a deep desire and necessity for self-determination. These community-made systems are often invisible for those who aren't participating in them, which can make investing from the outside challenging or unwelcomed.

Across the region, practitioners identified several shared visions for the future of their communities and the kinds of philanthropic investment they desire. People want to find creative and innovative ways to dismantle institutional oppressions and to stay in their communities despite environmental and coastal degradation. They want long-term investment and risk capital to address complex community opportunities and challenges, especially when they choose to work outside of institutional bounds. They want outside partners to honor the legacies of work upon which Southerners are building, and to let local communities (and not just their gatekeepers) lead decision making about how resources are used.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPY

Based on our findings, we offer the following guidance for foundations and other resourced institutions supporting arts and culture in the South:

- **Begin by listening**
- **Do your homework and honor Southern histories and legacies of work**
- **Consider community-driven philanthropic models**
- **Resource existing community cultural institutions and acknowledge them as organizing spaces**
- **Support the development of local artists and their work on their own terms**
- **Make long-term capital investments in existing community assets and projects (beyond the arts)**

We know that this research only skims the surface of the complex and vibrant arts and cultural ecosystems at work in the South. There are many areas ripe for further inquiry/action, including the need to better understand immigrant and undocumented communities' arts and cultural practices and needs; to gather additional information on systems of artist support beyond the nonprofit sector; and to make deeper investments in Southern storytelling to build collective consciousness and counter regional stigma. We hope this report will increase interest in learning from the South's rich histories of art and cultural work for change and will inform and instigate further research and investment.

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