

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Courtesy of the NEA

When History Calls For Repair

by Emilee Lord

Though sometimes difficult to parse, [Funding Bodies](#), a new book by [Sarah Wilbur](#), investigates the first five decades of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA) with a thorough and eye-opening account of the influence and effect larger governmental policy has had on small institutions and individual artists. Wilbur covers the NEA's inception, policies, and grantmaking practices that, over time, impacted U.S. dance makers. Through studying the archives, public records, interviews, and personal accounts from panel members and staff of the Dance Program (the NEA's dance funding entity), Wilbur exposes a story of tension between policy and practice. Of the work, Wilbur says "My goal is not to 'take a side' on particular debates, but instead to depict Dance Program history as a history of human struggle by differently invested decision-makers to resource and recognize the breadth of the US dance field." (pg 18)

After interviewing [Miguel Guitierrez](#) last summer about their podcast [Are You For Sale?](#) I started to delve into funding, philanthropy, and artist grant application processes. For me, decolonization in dance requires that the inequity inherent in philanthropic practice and the power of influence granting decision makers wield, come to light in the public's eye. This book offers that history and can add a wealth of information to larger conversations of inequity. It is much more scholarly than I had anticipated, is at times a challenge to get through, but is far and beyond worth delving into and helped to broaden my understanding of the policy behind funding bodies.

Wilbur structures the text as an academic study broken down into three large chapters centered around certain decades of NEA history and the predominant forces and deciding factors during those times. Of particular interest to me was the second chapter, covering 1981 to 1996, a period historically referred to as the "[Culture Wars](#)." Rather than tackle specific events that defined the Culture Wars, Wilbur recounts how the internal staff and panelists of the NEA worked to subvert standards that were creating outliers of whole communities of makers and thinkers, while fighting to operate within budget cuts and backlash from morally outraged conservative parties.

What this brings up for me is how 30-40 years later we have not come very far in this matter, all the proper intentions and activism

notwithstanding. With the Diversity Task Force created in 1993 under then-Director of NEA Expansion Arts A. B. Spellman, the conversation of equity, specifically the funding of non-white, non-eurocentric, non-coastal regions, took a more serious turn. "Incorporating cultural difference was, in Spellman's view, essential work required of all federal arts grantmakers to achieve philanthropic reforms that would tilt NEA priorities toward culturally sensitive approaches to federal arts endowment." (pg 150) It did not however, manage to reorganize the panelists or policy makers towards that end.

It was not enough, and remains not enough, to simply talk about funding a more diverse set of makers. It is at the policy level that deconilization needs to be centered. The decision making itself must come from an equitable place, and not what appears to be a trickle down of virtue signaling from the same set of policy makers and leadership overall. Without shifting how things get done the work falls far short, even with good and intentional leadership.

So that begs the question: who is this book for? For dance makers looking to more fully understand a system of funding they seek to rely upon, it may prove an informative read. This is not an account of artists' experience getting funding, this is the inside look at a funding body. I think this book is for policy makers. It serves, as an example, to make public record of a long history of one institution's funding practice. It calls into account - and accountability - how and where the task of funding fell short. And I wonder if the book is not written a bit for the National Endowment for the Arts itself, and the branches of government that fund it.

The afterword contains a call to save the NEA and points to the overall necessity of revamping funding systems. Such an exhaustive investigation will necessarily expose problems. It is this exposure that allows for awareness and, hopefully, change. Can this information be helpful to other granting institutions nationwide or is it only a call to one entity's responsibilities? How are the NEA, and the governmental branches responsible for its funding allocations, paying attention to this history?

Sarah Wilbur sums up very clearly in the afterword, *Does The NEA Need Saving? Endowment and Collective Repair*. "Throughout this narrative, I have labored to show how people inside of one funding body struggled and fell short of fashioning a democratic support system for dance. I, too, have struggled, inside the space of this Afterward, with finding a reliable foothold, an alternative set of pathways toward system-wide repair." (pg 237) The book offers huge amounts of information and its point seems to be to ignite this reparative work.

Sarah Wilbur, [Funding Bodies: Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts](#). Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2021. 288 pp

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