

# **A DECLARATION OF CULTURAL HUMAN RIGHTS: DRAFT**

## **PART I: THE FOUNDATIONS**

In order to advance the struggle for those political and economic rights recognized by all people in pursuit of a democratic, just and peaceful world;

In order to make that world manifest through the perpetuation and unfettered expression of creativity from all our peoples and cultures in a common wealth of wisdom, vision, knowledge, and means;

In order to supplant passivity with creative action, desecration with beauty, waste with husbandry, alienation with community, exploitation with cooperative harmony, and cultural chauvinism with appreciation and respect for human diversity;

In order to secure our very existence as we preserve and nurture the living planet that sustains us, **WE DECLARE AND NOW ACT TO GUARANTEE THE CULTURAL RIGHTS OF ALL PEOPLES.**

Among these rights are:

### **Participation**

All people—as groups, communities, or individuals—possess the right to participate in the creation of their own cultures. All people must be guaranteed the right of access to their own and others' cultural heritages. Culture is used here in the broadest sense, as the entire fabric of life, which would include social traditions, religious belief and practice, values, ethics, ideologies, material and technological possessions, written and oral histories—and all the arts. The creation of cultural expression should be a social process open to all. It must not be abridged socially, economically, or educationally by another or a dominant culture. The means of production, distribution and communication cannot justly be monopolized by any elite.

### **Community and Peace**

A major part of cultural expression is the traditional and the innovative interplay between people and their environment or place. Each environment is a unique pattern of animals, plants, soils,

climate, terrain, and other natural resources, as well as human technology, history, and surrounding communities—local, national, and international.

The suppression or destruction of cultural expression—like the violation of the natural, economic, social, or political rights of any community—upsets the delicate balance between people and place and can push a culture toward extinction.

Therefore, everyone has a right to community and place. Forced removal from community or place, loss of control over its resources, and the destruction, alteration, and pollution of place by the capricious, careless, self-serving, or hostile actions of a ruling elite or a foreign power violates that right.

### **Language**

A culture's visual and verbal language is its most profound and vital means of expression. It enables people to name and define the world they experience or create. It embodies the history, values, orientation, and traditions of a people and provides a critical means to express ideas and organize action in the face of present and future challenges.

Language evolves as people interact with each other, with their environment, and with other cultural groups. Language binds people together and, as such, is a crucial instrument of survival. Therefore the expression of a people's language must never be denied or discouraged by another or dominant culture.

### **Cultural Exchange**

Each culture discovers truths, gains perspectives, produces goods and technology, or creates universally powerful imagery simultaneously unique to that culture and potentially valuable to others.

The peaceful resolution of all conflict is facilitated by mutual understanding and communication. The growing technical and economic interdependence of the world's peoples and the need to bear mutual responsibility for global problems and to share insights and solutions require continuous and complex exchanges of information.

Therefore all peoples are entitled to interaction with people like and unlike themselves, to the knowledge, beauty, and resources freely shared by cultures other than their own.

### **Redress of Cultural Grievances and Conflicts**

All communities of people have the right to a formal means of local, national, and international redress of grievances and conflicts. Such redress must be offered within a framework of jurisprudence built upon principles of cultural as well as political and economic human rights.

## **PART II: PREPARATION FOR ACTION**

A precondition of a just and peaceful world is a climate in which all people, as groups, communities, or as individuals can assert with pride their own cultures and actively respect the cultures of others.

Above, in THE FOUNDATIONS, we have articulated fundamental human cultural rights to which all people are entitled. We have done so in the knowledge that our multicultural life and expression is unduly determined by a profit-directed elite. The corporate, social, religious, artistic, and civic institutions it creates and controls comprise a "dominant culture" which owns or dominates most of the means by which cultural expression is created, defined, taught, communicated, and rewarded in our country and much of the world. Its expression is predominantly commercial and is often militaristic, sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic.

Cultural chauvinism is a hallmark of the dominant culture. It supports and promotes expression that reflects the values and tastes of those who have dominated urban European-American life and culture. It limits or misrepresents the multicultural expression of other peoples, including those of the working classes and the poor, people of the Third World, people of color, and people who reside or participate in rural, regional, or alternative communities—in short, any who represent other traditions and values.

Now, as residents of the United States in the late 20th Century, we identify some of the public arenas in which our people must take action to secure their cultural rights.

## **Education**

Universal public education for children is required by law in most nations. In the schools children are formally and systematically exposed to mass-cultural values. Early learning informs a child about the proper way to speak, dress, and behave in order to win broad social acceptance. Yet American public education predominantly reflects those values of the dominant culture and children are easily bewildered about the value of their own personal, familial, or cultural identities, especially if they diverge from the so-called "norm."

State and local school district policies must create a curriculum in which cultural pluralism is nurtured and respected. The climate of each school must be conducive to each child's assertion of her or his cultural identity, and must encourage intercultural respect.

At present, through both curricula and climate, schools tend to reinforce a value system in which questioning and criticism of authority are discouraged; in which competition is fostered and cooperation is discouraged; in which single standards of excellence are accepted; in which the arts and other creative explorations are considered "leisure" or "entertainment" or are reserved for "gifted" students; in which passivity is learned behavior; and in which students are consumers of curriculum rather than creative collaborators in the learning and teaching process.

*We believe that written and unwritten policy must acknowledge that all students are entitled to their rights: to an education shaped by local cultures and needs; where numbers warrant, to an education that is bilingual or multilingual; to a curriculum which actively teaches and values the stories and images of the many cultures that have shaped human history; to a learning climate in which critical thinking is encouraged along with the creative assertion of identity; and to a curriculum that celebrates and reinforces cultural diversity and respect.*

## **Public Communications**

The information that people receive enables them to make decisions about what the world is like and what they themselves are like. The advent of sophisticated, centralized information-dissemination systems means that millions of people can be exposed simultaneously to a single piece of information. While this can potentially

draw the people of the planet together, all too often it promulgates a single notion of "reality." If cultural democracy is to flourish, people must have access to multiple sources of information, and must be able to produce as well as to consume them.

In public communications, as well as in education, people should have access to all information, and above all, should be equipped to respect passion and subjectivity and personal experience, as well as objectivity. Currently, centralized network media, like the educational system, promotes the dominant culture, and offers either stereotypes or absence for all "others." News reporting suggests that questions, opinions, criticism and dissent reflect disorder rather than the characteristics of a democracy at work.

Within the public communications arena the legitimacy of alternative media and points of view, as well as the right and ability of all people to exercise and express critical judgment, must be recognized.

*We believe that written and unwritten policy must acknowledge that all people are entitled to their rights: to an opportunity to share in the ownership, operation, and policy development of local television, cablevision, radio, press, and electronic information networks; to wide public awareness of local access laws, adequate information on the use of equipment and the broadcasting process, and access to the airways at times when broad audiences can be reached; to the ability to narrowcast to people of shared culture or interest as well as to broadcast to a wide audience; to regional or national media in which multicultural imagery and multiple viewpoints are visible, so that a wide range of options are available without cost differential.*

### **Arts**

Through the arts individuals and groups can uniquely communicate experience, perspectives, beliefs, hope, outrage, despair, desire, problems, and solutions. For cultural democracy to flourish, every cultural group, community and individual must have the means, opportunity, and public arena to make and to exhibit its arts, and to interact with its audiences. Participants, audiences, producers, and funding sources must acknowledge multiple standards of excellence and recognize the value of the creative process which emerges directly from cultural tradition and is a powerful instrument for cultural change.

Currently, the dominant culture attempts to define "the arts" and then dissociate them from the cultures of our people in two prime ways. First, they are considered commodities, generally marketed to and primarily accessible to college-educated, middle- or upper-class people. The dominant culture tends to house its art in specialized arts centers which isolates them from daily life and alienates them, through rarification, from most people's culture. Second, public funding agencies tend to support a single standard of so-called "quality" in the arts that reflects the values of the dominant culture and rarely fund artists or arts organizations critical of the dominant culture and political status quo, or simply peripheral to them.

*We believe that written or unwritten cultural policy must acknowledge that all people are entitled to their right to make art, regardless of economic or cultural situation. This implies access to opportunity, instruction, materials, tools, space, public display, and to both critical and unspecialized feedback. It includes the rights: to take for granted the respect of other cultural groups and of funding sources for excellence internal to any culture; to make and participate in the arts in the workplace, the park, the shopping mall, or anywhere that people gather, as much as in specialized art spaces; to compete for public funding in an arena in which the art of dissent or of varied cultures is considered a valid and valuable form of public expression.*

#### **Participation in the Creation of Public Cultural Policy**

The participation of every individual in setting policy for his or her society is theoretically guaranteed by many governments, but is often neither supported nor encouraged. The right to social participation and straightforward access to the process are hallmarks of cultural democracy, as are the subtler means of engendering the desire and power to participate.

Currently, those who find it easiest to effect the public process of cultural policy making at the Federal, State and local levels tend to be supporters of the dominant culture and those who monopolize the resources necessary to frame both the issues and solutions within a lopsided public debate. People without access to information, funds, attorneys, or the media are therefore indirectly barred from the participatory process. There is a pervasive assumption that those who do manage to voice dissent are troublemakers. Such people are

dismissed rather than acknowledged as partners in a dialogue. There is no arena for resolving conflicts in which one culture is threatened by another.

At the Federal level perhaps the greatest obstacle to participation in cultural policy development is the official and false assertion that there is no U.S. cultural policy! Written or not, a policy is in place and is used to unjustly allocate public cultural resources.

*We believe that written and unwritten public policy must acknowledge that all people are entitled to their rights: to choose to participate in public debate, regardless of gender, sexual preference, income, class, ethnicity, geography or culture; to information that encourages participation and conditions which enable people to participate without fear of being excluded; to publicly provided resources which enable otherwise disenfranchised people to participate equally in public process; to the expression of dissent in an arena in which dissent and challenge are valued; to access to an articulated legal process of resolving conflicts arising from cultural differences in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and to a formal means of national and international redress of cultural grievances and conflicts.*

#### **Public Services and Funding**

Publicly funded institutions have a direct responsibility to taxpayers and to the people whose lives they affect. Clients must play a role in shaping the policy of service organizations. Public funding agencies must develop guidelines providing a genuinely equal opportunity for people of all cultures and viewpoints to compete for funding. Universities, [libraries] and other public institutions must articulate policy for interaction with the communities in which they are located.

Currently, clients of public service agencies receive services that they are rarely given the opportunity to help define according to their own needs, and they seldom have any opportunity to challenge the *status quo*. Public funding bodies tend to fund generic, "model" projects in preference to locally or culturally-specific or experimental or radical solutions to problems. Universities and other institutions are de-emphasizing community service and local interaction. They increasingly ignore the communities to which they should be responsible.

*We believe that written and unwritten policy must acknowledge that all people are entitled to their rights: to participate in setting policy for those public service institutions that affect their lives; to a democratic tax structure that equitably returns tax dollars and services to communities; to public support for local initiative in solving problems of local concern in all arenas from education to economic development to public art.*

## CONCLUSION

A society in which a single culture or a single set of standards flourishes is a society both weak and impoverished. The potential collective strength of this country lies in our ability to recognize and be inspired by our diversity. We are people of different histories, languages, traditions, skills, values, ideologies and tastes. Our social life must be constantly challenged and reinvented as a collective project. There is no preordained system that will produce adventure and joy. All people have a right to cultural as well as to political and economic democracy. The three are mutually reinforcing and all three are necessary to the survival of any one of them as well as to the survival of society itself.

*Within a structure of cultural democracy and self determination, however, each culture must maintain the right to challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism internally and externally.*

With the establishment of cultural democracy, we can truly contemplate the possibility of a world free from violence, contempt, and fear.

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*The preceding is a "living document," still in progress. It's a huge job, but we have to start somewhere. Criticism, commentary, and contributions are not only welcome, but necessary for its completion.*

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