

Division of Public Programs

Sample of a Successful Application

This document contains the narrative and walkthrough of a previously funded grant application. Every successful application is different, and this application may have been prepared to meet a slightly different set of guidelines. Each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations, as well as the requirements in the current notice of funding opportunity (NOFO). Prospective applicants should consult the current Public Humanities Projects NOFO at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/public/public-humanities-projects> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Public Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

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Project Title: What If...?: Afrofuturism and the Quest for a Just, Inclusive, and Sustainable Society

Institution: Maine Humanities Council

Project Director: Dr. Samaa Abdurraqib

Grant Program: Public Humanities Projects: Discussions (small) Implementation

A) Nature of the Request

The Maine Humanities Council requests a grant of \$250,000 to support a Humanities Discussions Implementation project. ***What If...?: Afrofuturism and the Quest for a Just, Inclusive, and Sustainable Society*** is a 24-month initiative that will provide shared humanities experiences and unique opportunities for Mainers to read, reflect, engage, and connect with one another to envision a future that is more just, inclusive, and sustainable. The initiative will bring intellectually rich public humanities programming to communities big and small throughout Maine.

The initiative is focused on Afrofuturism and will use a variety of Afrofuturist texts to ground and propel conversation. As with all Maine Humanities Council programs, *What If...?* activities are designed to create connections, foster a deepened sense of individual and community agency, and inspire increased civic engagement. Themes within the initiative will include: (1) Racial justice, (2) Climate justice, (3) Food justice, (4) Religion and Spirituality, and (5) Democracy and its possibilities. We believe that Afrofuturist texts will help focus community thinking and discussion on possible futures and envisioning the world(s) we want to create together. Afrofuturist texts center Black Diasporic ways of being and thinking, and invite the reader to imagine how life should be. They take on recognizable systems of oppression and flip these systems on their head. They challenge us to confront oppression and transcend boundaries. For many Mainers, this programming through the Maine Humanities Council will be a first exposure to Afrofuturist texts, and we intend to use this newness to invite participants to name some of the key challenges we collectively face and to experiment with imaginative ways of engaging with these challenges.

What If...? has been designed to employ several different program formats which, together, will (1) maximize visibility for the initiative and bring it to as many individuals and communities as possible, and (2) provide opportunity for extended, deep exploration of initiative topics and themes over the span of several months in the community. High visibility programming associated with the project includes the Readers Retreat, our major public kickoff event focusing on Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*. To be held in May, 2022, the Readers Retreat will gather 500+ participants, in person and virtually, for a deep dive into Butler's work and an introduction to Afrofuturist literature. In addition, in each of the project's two years, the MHC will bring high-profile programming to Maine communities led by two renowned, accomplished, inspiring individuals. In the first year of the initiative, Toshi Reagon will visit three different Maine communities to lead community discussions in relation to her operatic version of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. In year two of the initiative, artist and educator Daniel Minter will present public humanities programming in two different Maine communities, focusing on art and process, which will invite the public to envision a more just, equitable, and inclusive future for the State of Maine.

Throughout the initiative, the Maine Humanities Council will use tried and true public humanities program models that we have been developing and refining in Maine communities for more than 40 years. Small, community-based program formats will include:

- Multi-session facilitated reading and discussion programming through the MHC's successful *Discussion Project*. With reading groups based in workplaces, libraries, adult education programs, correctional facilities, and other community settings, participants will have the opportunity to read together and dive deep into the themes.
- Speaker programs featuring speakers from the MHC's *Maine Speaks* program, which will bring scholars and other experts to public libraries and other settings in every corner of the state to provide opportunities to learn and reflect together on the project's themes.

The initiative responds strongly to, and shares key themes with, A More Perfect Union. Our collective pursuit of the enduring shared goals of life, liberty, happiness requires ongoing imaginative community work to build a more perfect union rooted in the ideal of human equality. Community discussion of Afrofuturist texts will provide a framework and a set of conceptual and narrative tools for this work.

B) Humanities Content

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union . . ." So begins the United States Constitution and so began a speech by then U.S. Senator Barack Obama on March 18, 2008. In the same speech, Obama named the nation's "original sin of slavery," observing that—despite the ideals of equality, liberty, and justice that the charter explicitly promises—the controversy surrounding the enslavement of people of African descent is embedded within the Constitution, in the founding document of our nation. The signers left the moral, economic, and political dilemma of slavery and its enduring ramifications for subsequent generations to reconcile in the future.

Americans in the United States often look to the founding of the nation and the principles crystallized in that dramatic era. However, the attainment of "a more perfect union" is not fulfilled by nostalgic yearning for the nation's past, in which inequities and injustices marred the cultural landscape. It is, instead, fulfilled by the continuous work of justice in the present and, importantly, the hopes and visions for the future. As Obama went on to affirm in his speech, "But what we know—what we have seen—is that America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity to hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow" (2008).

The Maine Humanities Council's new *What If . . . ?* initiative invites Mainers to imagine such a tomorrow, by employing the conceptual boundlessness of Afrofuturism as a model for how to imagine futures, reimagine histories, and challenge assumptions of what is and is not possible. Previous initiatives have focused a great deal on the past and, in particular, the history of Maine's statehood. While it is essential to interrogate history, to learn the lessons that continually unfold from it, and to recognize its repercussions in the present, this orientation can often inhibit creative thinking about the future. The *What If . . . ?* initiative encourages Mainers to consider the questions "What kind of future do we want?" and "How do we create a more perfect union for ourselves and our successors?" and to begin to envision what it might take to manifest those futures. A more perfect union requires a citizenry psychologically and emotionally ready to accept a currently imperfect state, and open to imagining what does not currently exist and perhaps never will. *What If . . . ?* offers a rare opportunity to Mainers: a gentle and secure encounter with our imaginative limitations and a guided exploration of future possibilities beyond what we've dreamed of.

Despite Maine being the nation's most racially homogenous state, any telling of the state's history that does not include the peoples who are indigenous to this land and the communities of color who call it home is incomplete. From its earliest history to its most recent, the Wabanaki peoples; generations of African Americans descended from enslaved Africans; Latinx, Arab, and Asian immigrants; and immigrants and refugees from African nations have all helped to shape the cultural and social landscape of the place we now call the state of Maine. Nearly 97% of Mainers identify as white and less than 2% of the state's population is Black. Of those, nearly half are immigrants from African nations like Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—many of whom arrived in Maine during the past two decades, seeking refuge from civil war and violence in their home countries, and re-settling in and around the urban centers of Portland and Lewiston.

Overcoming histories of hardship and trauma, with the resilience to hope and dream of a more peaceful, liberated, and thriving future is not an attribute unique to U.S.-Americans; it is a human attribute. Still, as we consider the enduring quest of this nation to create "a more perfect union," it is clear that continuously envisioning a better tomorrow for ourselves, our communities, and our world is an essential part of that endeavor. Democracy is, in part, an imaginative enterprise.

The *What If . . . ?* initiative invites Mainers to exercise the tool of imagination to ask, “What if we were all united for the cause of truly equitable access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”

Afrofuturism provides a productive lens through which to imagine and envision the future. Afrofuturism refers to a dynamic and broadening umbrella, designating a creative aesthetic, a methodology, and an epistemology that envisions Black people in an imagined future, despite the trauma of the past and adversity of the present. According to Ytasha Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Afrofuturism “intersects the imagination, technology, Black culture, liberation, and mysticism. As an artistic aesthetic it bridges literature, music, visual arts, film, and dance. As a mode of self-healing and self-liberation, it’s the use of imagination that is most significant because it helps people to transform their circumstances” (2017). Thus, though the term was coined in 1993, Afrofuturism has been in practice as both an aesthetic and methodology for as long as peoples of African diasporic cultures and communities have engaged in creative production. It encompasses the creative genres of storytelling and fiction, poetry, music, dance, and visual arts, among others. Afrofuturism is exemplified in the works of creators like fiction writers Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delaney, Nalo Hopkinson, and Tananarive Due; poets Audre Lorde, Jayne Cortez, and Tracy K. Smith; musicians Sun Ra, Alice Coltrane, Janelle Monáe, and Outkast; and visual artists Renee Cox, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Sanford Biggers.

Among Afrofuturism’s array of instruments, Black speculative literature is often given prominence. Mainstream speculative literature has historically excluded the experiences of the African diaspora from its storylines and imaginings about the future. Afrofuturist authors seek to address these omissions by centering Black characters “to be the agent and subject of the future, and not relegated to the primeval past, used as props or pawns, or disappeared altogether” (Morris 2016, 33). Whether in the future, a reimagined present, or a reclaimed and re-envisioned past, these authors represent the textures and conditions of Black lives, ranging from the utterly dystopian to the richly utopian. Acknowledging that, for many, the notion that there are Black people and Black cultures in the future is a strange concept, Black speculative literature challenges the assumption that the future is necessarily white and western and insists that audiences interrogate the vastness of what is possible and for whom it is presumed impossible.

In its attention to technology, futuristic imagery, and speculative ideas, it would seem that Afrofuturism has less interest in the past. However, Afrofuturist creative practice profoundly attunes to the history of people and cultures of the African diaspora. As scholar Alondra Nelson points out, “These works represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them” (2002, 9). In so doing, Afrofuturism encourages reclamation and reimagining of these pasts. Looking simultaneously forward and backward, it bridges the past, present, and future—often nonlinearly—and offers the idea of “time as another dimension through which to reimagine identity” (Womack 2017). With a mutual emphasis on the continuity and interdependence of the past, present, and future, Afrofuturism shares a conceptual overlap with the notion of Indigenous futurity, which Mvskoke (Creek) scholar Laura Harjo describes as “the enactment of theories and practices that activate our ancestors’ unrealized possibilities, the act of living out the futures we wish for in a contemporary moment, and the creation of the conditions for these futures” (2019, 5).

In working to reclaim and reimagine pasts, Afrofuturists must confront the many erasures and absences of Black voices in the chronicles of U.S. history, recognizing that this dearth does not indicate that these voices were indeed silent. As Sheree Renee Thomas explains, Afrofuturism “imagines that what was once presumed lost, forgotten, soiled, and stripped away can be found, can be reclaimed and resurrected, remixed and revived” (2016, 1). Therefore, despite the scarcity of Black perspectives, Afrofuturism employs the technologies and tenacity available in the present to uncover and fashion the stories of forebears from what historian Saidiya Hartman calls the “the scraps of the archive” (2008, 4).

As an interpretation of the expression, “I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams,” this tendency of Afrofuturism to orient toward the past is the realization of a place in a long lineage and of interrelationship with ancestors; the understanding that, in the present, we are actually our ancestors’ futures. This is also a reminder that, like us, our forebears hoped, dreamed, invented, and imagined futures more vivid and free than the lives they lived. The poet Sekou Sundiata illustrates it best: “Maybe, I can break it down to you like this: / We dreamed you Black in your badness / Made you up out of poems and lies and words to live by / And we ourselves was dreamed, most likely by some slaves / Whenever they got a little space to climb into their heads and be free / So when they closed their eyes, what did they see? / They saw you; they saw me” (2000). Likewise, Afrofuturism invites accountability to subsequent generations, as the dreams and deeds of our present inform and create the futures that they will inhabit.

As an epistemology and methodology, Afrofuturism works from the understanding that race itself is a technology (Coleman 2009; Womack 2017). Constructed to dehumanize, to bind and oppress, and to establish and maintain social hierarchies with wide-ranging repercussions, race has long been an implement of domination. Instead of being subjected to the technology of race in their creative work, Afrofuturist authors and artists seek to become agents of it; to unshackle their imaginations from projections and assumptions based on what race signifies in the present paradigm. As Lisa Yaszek observes, “While early Afrofuturists are concerned primarily with the question of whether or not there will be any future whatsoever for people of color, contemporary Afrofuturists assume that in the future race will continue to matter to individuals and entire civilizations alike” (2006, 42). Rather than imagining a future in which race ceases to exist or matter, or one in which all people—both racialized and white—are subsumed into a generic and homogenous human race, Afrofuturists reject such colorblind racial ideologies and, instead, reconfigure the technology of race to contrast the bondage of the past—and its enduring legacy in the present—with the boundlessness possible when Blackness persists in an imagined future. Though the social construct of race is a technology most often deployed to separate and subjugate, when it is blended with agency and imagination and reshaped by Afrofuturist creators, it becomes a pathway to liberation.

Using the lens of Afrofuturism, the Maine Humanities Council’s *What If...?* public humanities initiative invites Mainers to imagine the possibilities for creating a more just future within five specific themes: racial justice, climate justice, food justice, religion and spirituality, and democracy and its possibilities. By centering community programming on Afrofuturism as a path to envisioning and creating a more perfect union, we aim to give Mainers the opportunity to sit in new worlds with community and unlearn assumptions together, and to envision new possibilities for healthy societies through small and large-format public humanities programming. Through this lens, using Afrofuturist texts and visions of the future, it becomes apparent that the imagination is an implement of change and liberation, even in the midst of challenging circumstances. As Womack explains, “The imagination is a lifeline. The imagination is an extension of the resilience of the human spirit” (2017). Imagination is an essential tool—to which we have equal access—that we use to create the worlds that we want to see, to create a more perfect union.

C) Project Formats

The project has been designed to employ several different, complementary program formats, aimed at both maximizing the public awareness of the project throughout the state and providing substantial “long tail” opportunities for deep, sustained engagement with project materials. As with all Maine Humanities Council programming, *What If...?* program offerings are aimed at increasing connections among members of the community, fostering a strong sense of individual and community agency, and inspiring increased future civic engagement on the part of participants.

The initiative will focus on Afrofuturism and use a variety of Afrofuturist texts to ground and propel conversation through a variety of formats, exploring the following themes: a) Racial justice, b) Climate justice, c) Food justice, d) Religion and spirituality, and d) Democracy and its possibilities.

1. Readers Retreat: Public event kick-off

The initiative will officially begin with a public event on May 20 and 21, 2022, on the campus of Southern Maine Community College in South Portland. Readers Retreat, the MHC's longtime and much-loved "big book" event, brings engaged readers together for two days to explore an important text, connect with one another, discuss ideas, and leave inspired after a rich experience of camaraderie and conversation. Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* will be the featured text. The event will include between four and five lectures by scholars, authors, and other experts in the field of Octavia Butler and Afrofuturism, including members of the project's scholar advisory panel; break-out groups facilitated by trained discussion leaders from the MHC's facilitator pool; and meals at which participants can connect for informal discussions. While this event will primarily serve 150 in-person participants, lectures and panelist discussions will be livestreamed and recorded for online use, including facilitated discussions in sites far from the event. With the virtual component, we expect the kick-off event to reach over 550 participants statewide.

The MHC has extensive experience offering this kind of program; it has been a popular public offering annually since 1998, drawing a consistent base of repeat attendees. In 2020, for the first time ever, the program was held virtually. It was a highly successful experiment, and provided the MHC with valuable experience with both the technical and programmatic know-how for large-scale online programming. In recent years, the text selection, as well as increased community outreach efforts, have expanded and broadened the Readers Retreat audience. Throughout 2022, *Wild Seed* will be featured in reading and discussion program offerings statewide (see below). All participants from those programs will be encouraged to attend the Readers Retreat, and will have recordings available to watch at their leisure as well. Because our reading and discussion programs are offered to a broad and diverse set of partners and participants, we anticipate that the Readers' Retreat attendees will also reflect the same level of broad diversity.

2. The Discussion Project: Facilitated multi-session reading and discussion programming

Multi-session facilitated reading and discussion programs will be an essential aspect of the sustained statewide reach of the project over the course of 24 months. Such discussions are at the heart of the Maine Humanities Council's long experience serving the people of Maine. This program format is one of the best ways we know to foster meaningful discussion among people who may not know each other yet, and to deepen connection among those who know each other well.

Each group is convened by a community partner organization and guided by an expert facilitator recruited and trained by the Maine Humanities Council. Groups typically meet once per month for four or five months. At each meeting, participants reflect together on poetry, books, stories, and discuss the ideas and questions they see at work in what they have read. Participants practice finding words for what they want to say and listening to each other carefully. They leave feeling more connected to their community, better able to appreciate its variety and to see the value of their own contribution.

Reading lists are developed in cooperation with scholarly advisors and community partner organizations. Facilitators are recruited and trained by the Maine Humanities Council to facilitate text-based conversations that emphasize close reading, careful listening, and the value of openness and curiosity. (For more information on program format, project reading lists, and facilitator training, please see Attachment 5: Walkthrough.)

The MHC will work with a wide variety of partner organizations in carrying out the project. Our partnership with public libraries throughout the state is a key resource for reaching communities across the entire state. Town libraries are community hubs for broad audiences; in many rural Maine towns, they are the only place where people congregate for humanities or other cultural community experiences. In addition, we will partner with correctional institutions, adult education programs, domestic violence agencies, and other community-based organizations to bring *What If...?* reading and discussion programming to Maine communities. As with all MHC programming, we will prioritize project resources for communities who have been historically underrepresented in public humanities opportunities. We will work with our partners to make this programming accessible to participants from as wide a range of experiences as possible.

We expect to hold 24 reading and discussion programs (four per season: fall, winter/spring, summer) over the project's two years, serving approximately 360 community members in every county in Maine.

3. Maine Speaks: Speakers Bureau

The second core element of the initiative is a speakers program to be offered to public libraries and other community-based organizations throughout the state. Designed specifically to maximize the spread of the initiative to even the most rural parts of Maine, this program will reach twelve different communities across the state, featuring speakers who have expertise on topics related to the project's themes. In recent years, the MHC has gained a great deal of experience in developing and offering this kind of programming through foreign policy lectures and discussions (particularly popular with Maine's rural libraries) and bicentennial presentations on themes related to Maine's statehood. In the past 18 months, Maine Speaks has expanded to include a roster of community speakers who speak on a broad range of pertinent and engaging topics. Examples of recent program topics include an examination of the past and present of Wabanaki voices in Maine, New England's complicity in the global slave economy, issues of race, and the question: Do we as a people *deserve* Democracy?. (Please see Attachment 5: Walkthrough for additional examples of programs to be offered as part of Maine Speaks.)

Maine Speaks fills an important niche in ensuring that *What If...?* programming is accessible to as many Mainers as possible. Over many years, the Maine Humanities Council has come to understand that not everyone is drawn to facilitated reading and discussion programming. However powerful we know that program format to be, many individuals are looking to participate in programming that does not involve a long commitment. Moreover, reading and discussion programming can be perceived as "higher risk" for participants – when someone goes to a book discussion program, they can reasonably assume that they might be asked their thoughts about the book. This isn't for everyone. With speaker programming like Maine Speaks, however, individuals can attend a talk (or access it online), without needing to make a multi-month commitment and without feeling they might be put on the spot. Maine Speaks provides a meaningful, intellectually rich, low-barrier means for participating in the initiative.

With at least 12 Maine Speaks programs offered throughout the duration of the project, we will reach at least 360 Mainers in-person, with hundreds more via live-stream and video archive.

4. Community Engagement with Toshi Reagon and Daniel Minter

The fourth major part of the initiative will feature statewide program elements led by two world-renowned, accomplished, inspiring individuals: musician, composer, curator, and producer Toshi Reagon; and artist and educator Daniel Minter.

In the first year of programming, Toshi Reagon will visit three Maine communities to lead community discussions relating to her opera *Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower*. Ms. Reagon, a musician and composer of international prominence, has focused on Octavia Butler's work for many

years, including the wildly popular podcast series [Octavia's Parables](#) (created in large part to help more people engage with Octavia Butler's work—which helped, in 2020, to put *Parable of the Sower* on the NYT Bestseller list). She composed her Parable Opera, as she calls it, with the intention of drawing community together to bring this work and the issues it represents greater recognition and community awareness. Ms. Reagon will be in Maine for a fellowship at Bowdoin College's McKeen Center for the Common Good, which will enable her to stage the Portland, Maine-based performance of *Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower* (which has been presented in New York, Los Angeles, Abu Dhabi, Singapore, the Netherlands, and more). For the months leading up to the performance, *What If...?* participants across the state will be reading the Parable series via our statewide Discussion Project programming. To have Ms. Reagon here will be a significant cultural moment for these groups and the state as a whole. We expect to see substantial audience interest in Ms. Reagon's MHC appearances: community conversations to be held in partnership with the public libraries in the communities of Rockport, Lewiston, and Bangor. These general public programs will also be livestreamed and recorded for future viewing. We are excited to host these community conversations outside of Portland, the primary urban setting in Maine. The majority of Maine's population lives rurally; traveling to Portland to partake in events is not a reasonable ask for most Mainers. We believe that all Mainers, regardless of where they live, should have access to the content and the connection that our programming provides.

What If...? programming featuring Toshi Reagon will be informed by the MHC's successful experience providing library-based programming in Maine during a visit to the state in 2018 by Tracy K. Smith, 22nd Poet Laureate of the United States. By connecting Discussion Project book groups and Maine Speaks audiences with themes and texts related to the larger community-wide events, we will be able to leverage the energy and engagement of *What If...?* participants from across the state to make Ms. Reagon's community conversation programs richer and deeper. Ms. Reagon is specifically interested in engaging in conversations with community-based organizers and changemakers – people who are striving towards justice and equity in their local areas. Through our programming, we have solid connections with community-based organizations, organizers, and changemakers working on water justice, food justice, racial justice, and gender justice – we are enthused about connecting them with a nationally recognized artist and scholar like Ms. Reagon.

In Year Two, artist and educator Daniel Minter will visit the towns of Belfast and Bangor, each over several weeks, to hold art-based community conversations diverse audiences connected to our site partners in those areas. Mr. Minter has long held these kinds of visits with communities across the nation. He learns about a region and its needs, challenges, and dreams; then facilitates discussions and workshops that invite participants to learn and understand the ways that art can represent both a connection to the past and a forward-looking vision. Minter will do the same for this project, getting to know community needs and issues of concern in Belfast (a rural coastal town with challenges of gentrification and old ways versus new) and Bangor (Maine's second-largest city, a major resource for northern counties, with a vibrant historical Black population). The discussions and workshops within this grant will explore themes represented in Minter's previously created artwork. When visiting Belfast and Bangor, Minter, an expert illustrator and carver, will carry with him examples of his many carvings and paintings which contain thematic elements of Afrofuturism, using these pieces as a place to ground conversations about the significance and importance of Afrofuturism to Black Diasporic people. This humanities model—exploring community needs through discussion of a work of art—will be similar to the MHC's "Consider This" program, which focused on community reflection on artworks created by local artists. Minter is a well-known artist (and a very popular children's book illustrator) who has grounded his art and process in themes of displacement and diaspora, spirituality in the Afro-Atlantic world, and Blackness—both "ordinary" and extraordinary.

Toshi Reagon and Daniel Minter’s deep work in Rockport, Lewiston, Belfast, and Bangor will offer these communities extraordinary humanities experiences that will be remembered. In Lewiston and Bangor in particular (both are, with Portland, among Maine’s most ethnically diverse cities), the opportunity for community members to connect with these powerhouses of Black-led movements in art will inspire and help to fulfill the MHC’s program goals of connection, agency, and engagement on a very strong level. Both will do much with the “What if?…” theme to invite the public to envision a more just, equitable, and inclusive future for the state of Maine.

While we expect this program to rely primarily on in-person programming, key presentation and discussion components will be made available through online streaming to expand the potential audience and protect against possible public health-related restrictions. The MHC has had extensive experience successfully presenting this kind of programming through online means.

Over the course of the two years, we anticipate reaching thousands of Mainers through this and related programming. We also expect this programming to have long lasting effects that will have ripples and resonances for years to come. We have seen in the past that by focusing statewide efforts on a single set of themes over an extended period of time, the impact of our work can be multiplied, and it will be our intention throughout this project to connect people across the state and spark conversations that are visionary, forward-moving, and inspiring.

D) Project Resources

Chief among the resources that the MHC will bring to support the project is our broad and deep statewide network of humanities scholars, facilitators, and partner organizations. In addition, MHC program staff have long experience working with scholars and partner organizations to offer many different kinds of public humanities programming. In addition, they have vigorous extended outreach efforts to create relationships with new audience groups and new partners in fitting with our strategic priorities around diversity, equity, and inclusion. With in-house programming expertise, varied and engaged partner organizations with extensive experience working with the public, and accomplished scholars and facilitators to provide high quality humanities programming to a broad community, the MHC is well poised to succeed with the project.

Another key resource is the MHC’s experience at preparing discussion leaders for program facilitation. Part of this project will involve trainings for project scholars, presenters, and facilitators, which will include substantial orientation to both humanities content and facilitation best practices.

Finally, advisory groups composed of community leaders, scholars, and other experts will provide essential knowledge of how best to serve our audiences. This approach—close partnerships with and reliance on advisors, which has been a key part of the MHC’s program work over many years—will ensure that this project’s community reach will be strong, deep, and eagerly welcomed.

Our working bibliography for the project, including the texts providing its philosophical underpinning, are in the project bibliography (Attachment 4). In addition, sample program syllabus materials, trainings sessions, and speakers series topics are included in the Walkthrough (Attachment 5).

E) Project History

In 2016, the Maine Humanities Council carried out its first experiment to test what it might look like to present an extended, broad-based suite of humanities programming to the people of Maine based upon a single over-arching theme. That initiative, funded through the Public Programs

Division of the National Endowment for the Humanities, was “A Broad and Sure Foundation: the 14th Amendment in American Life and Imagination.” In that initiative, we engaged Mainers in text-based discussions around topics like citizenship, due process, and equal protection of the law. In 2017, we extended the experiment with the NEH-funded project, “Literature and Public Life.” Rooted in the philosophical work of American philosopher John Dewey, *Lit & Pub* used text-based discussion and other public humanities programming to promote conversation around important civic topics like healthcare, education, and domestic violence. Through these two statewide initiatives, the Maine Humanities Council has built deep experience and learned many valuable lessons about what is necessary to engage the public fully and well in discussions of topics that matter.

What If...? is the culmination of eighteen months of conversations between MHC program staff, site partners, and advisors about the changing state of the world, patterns of power, entrenched disparities and oppression, and the uncertain future. 2020 marked the bicentennial of Maine statehood, and across the state many communities had their attention focused on the past. It felt to us like the time was right to look instead to the future, and to do so in a way that would inspire creativity and imagination in facing questions of what we want our state to become.

This brought us to the question of “What if?...” as a theme for programming, a theme that would encourage hope and thoughtful forward-looking perspectives in Maine communities. Our advisors pointed us to the canon of Afrofuturist literature, which is characterized by its creative engagement with the problems of the world and possibilities of living. When we shared this approach with partners around the state, we discovered tremendous enthusiasm for the theme (which is much in line with increasing statewide requests we’ve received for humanities programs that explore racism and antiracism).

With this welcoming audience base, the Maine Humanities Council is well-poised to deliver this initiative. We offer unique connections, resources, and expertise to small nonprofits throughout Maine with a grassroots, statewide reach across cultural, educational, and social service organizations built over more than 40 years, matched by no other organization in Maine. We are unique in our tools—a broad text-based curriculum and a growing pool of trained facilitators—and have staff skilled at outreach, logistics, and data analysis collaboratively running all programs. We are confident in our staff, facilitator, and partner capacity to effectively reach every county in Maine, including our most remote communities. And while Maine’s college and universities are starting to discuss Afrofuturism and its related questions, the MHC is unique in that we’re taking those themes directly into communities statewide.

The discussions that these programs will prompt will also extend beyond the years of this initiative as communities continue to grapple with questions of power, oppression, and community in Maine. Our programming aims to connect community members, foster individual agency, and engage and empower individuals within their communities. Ongoing public engagement is sure to follow.

F) Audience, Marketing, and Promotion

Through many community-level reading and discussion programs, speaker programs, and several large public events, we will be connecting with a variety of in-person audiences across Maine. Although it is designed first and foremost as an in-person project, this initiative also provides wide opportunity to connect with audiences online, both in real time and through the re-broadcast of programs and events. Our experience broadcasting programs online during the pandemic reached over 500 people each for several single-session events. Our total primary audience estimate for in-person events, online attendance, and program re-broadcast is 3,250. We feel confident that opportunities for online attendance coupled with recent work to expand in-person program

accessibility will allow us to connect with Mainers broadly, in line with what we have accomplished in previous statewide initiatives.

This project will be promoted in a variety of ways, including but not limited to: paid and organic social media, e-newsletters, three MHC print publications, and the news media. Marketing and outreach materials will include project-branded graphics and copy, ensuring that all related programs and events are recognized as being a part of the broader project. In addition to providing opportunities for expanded audience reach, communication through on-going social media (6,697 total followers) and e-newsletters (4,679 total subscribers) will share opportunities for program engagement as well as relatable participant experiences.

Our larger public events, including the Readers Retreat as well as community discussion programming with Toshi Reagon and Daniel Minter, will offer unique programming for Maine audiences. This will give us an excellent opportunity to provide engaging stories to a variety of media outlets, including the state's two largest newspapers, statewide public radio, and community radio. Over the past several years, the MHC has cultivated strong relationships with these major statewide media outlets, and we are confident our relationships with these outlets will ensure news of these events is published and circulated in the state's primary media markets. Our experience with news media outreach resulted in three news stories and two "sold out" events when the MHC hosted former US Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith as part of her "American Conversations: Celebrating Poems in Rural Communities" initiative. For this project we anticipate a related series of op-ed pieces and multiple newspaper stories published.

In addition to communications issued by the MHC, site partners will be provided with their own branded publicity tools—supporting a broad grassroots promotional reach across community networks throughout the state. In the past year, the MHC has partnered with 278 organizations across Maine's 16 counties, including 118 public libraries. Our 2021 Read ME program saw 72 participating public libraries access the host site publicity toolkit 198 times. Our strong statewide reputation with rural public libraries will help us draw traditional humanities audiences, while our recent outreach work to expand program accessibility will invite participation from traditionally under-resourced communities. Our outreach efforts at the height of the pandemic resulted in 76 new participants engaging in our annual Readers Retreat program. Adult Education, ESOL, and Justice-Involved audiences read and discussed the featured book while later attending the event online with other participants.

G) Evaluation of the Project's Impact

For our comprehensive evaluation plan, we will collect both quantitative and qualitative data across multiple platforms and formats. We will use the online platform Survey Monkey as our primary evaluation tool. Survey Monkey will allow us to collect extensive narrative feedback as well as easily observe and analyze trends in our quantitative data. We will track the number of communities, participants, and partners involved in this project and their geographic spread in order to assess statewide impact. Demographic information collected from participants on age, race and ethnicity, and education level will tell us whether we have been able to reach a broad and diverse audience.

In order to assess the relevance of the readings and to gauge the impact the texts have had on participants' understanding of our program themes, project participants will be asked about their familiarity with Afrofuturist texts, as well as open-ended questions about their experience with specific readings and their interaction with the Afrofuturist genre more broadly. As with all our programming, our *What If...?* initiative is designed to increase participants' sense of connection, personal agency, and engagement within their communities. We will look closely

at responses to questions intended to measure growth in these areas. Project site coordinators and facilitators will be asked to complete online reflections focused on the same aforementioned areas. In addition, we will offer small group debriefing sessions with both site coordinators and our scholars and facilitators to further assess the impact engaging with Afrofuturist texts has had on the communities hosting these discussions.

Evaluation materials are reviewed three times per year by MHC staff. We use the program data collected each season to continue to refine our program content and community outreach strategies. Our network of facilitators are then advised of relevant information gathered from our community partners so that they may continue to cultivate their facilitation practice.

H) Organizational Profile

Since 1976, the **Maine Humanities Council** has been an important presence for communities across the state of Maine. During its early days, the MHC funded major statewide grant projects and presented powerful public events, such as the state's first AIDS conference in the 1980s. More recently, the MHC has been known for its innovative programming, such as *Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Health Care* (which it piloted in the 1990s and helped spread to a national program still running in over 20 states) and *Coming Home*, programming for Veterans (again, sparking a national model) in 2014. These days, the MHC is known for creating text-based humanities programming that is responsive to community needs and bringing Mainers together to talk about things that matter. We work hard to meet the large and growing interest in community programming about race, democracy, and climate change, among other issues. NEH-funded special initiatives in recent years have included: "A Broad and Sure Foundation: the 14th Amendment in American Life and Imagination," "Literature & Public Life: Creating the Great Community," "Hard Journeys Home: a book group for justice-involved Veterans," and "2020: Bicentennial Vision for Maine Past, Present, and Future."

Facilitated book groups are at the core of MHC programming, and have been that since the early 1990s. These rely on our strong proven relationships with public libraries, adult education departments, Veteran-serving organizations, the justice system, domestic violence and substance abuse resource centers, and other community organizations. All MHC programming depends on working closely with local partner organizations, with whom we collaboratively focus on using humanities themes to fit their communities' specific needs. MHC programming annually reaches across all of Maine's 16 counties. Our mission states: "The Maine Humanities Council, a statewide non-profit organization, uses the humanities—literature, history, philosophy, and culture—as a tool for positive change in Maine communities. Our programs and grants encourage critical thinking and conversations across social, economic, and cultural boundaries." The MHC's annual budget for fiscal year 2021 is \$1,455,215.

The key partners for the initiative will be public libraries and other nonprofit organizations around the state. We include some examples of these partners in Attachment 3. The Maine Humanities Council is a well-established and trusted partner to these networks. During the pandemic up to the last few months, we've partnered with more than 200 libraries and other nonprofit organizations in all of Maine 16 counties, an accomplishment that we feel speaks strongly to the trust that nonprofits statewide hold in our staff and our work.

I) Project Team

The project team is composed of Maine Humanities Council program staff, under the direction of Associate Director Dr. Samaa Abdurraqib. The MHC staff team will oversee the project and be responsible for successful implementation of the various program elements.

Dr. Samaa Abdurraqib (she/her), Associate Director, provides strategic direction for the development and implementation of the MHC's statewide work and is staff lead for advancing the MHC's diversity, equity, and inclusion priorities. In partnership with the Executive Director, she works to support the strategic planning, budgeting, fundraising, and administrative functions of the MHC. She will oversee all aspects of this project and be the key contact for scholars. Samaa will also be the key point person for Toshi Reagon and Daniel Minter.

Jan Bindas-Tenney (they/them), Program Coordinator: Facilitation and Partnerships, leads MHC facilitator and speaker recruitment, training, and support; co-organizes partnership development; and coordinates and implements poetry programming. Jan will serve as a key point person on MHC programming involving new partners. Working as part of the Outreach and Partnerships team, they will develop new partner outreach and relationship-building strategies during the course of this grant.

Nicole Rancourt (she/her) is the MHC's Program Manager. Her primary role is to develop, coordinate, and support the processes and systems necessary to implement program and grant initiatives effectively and efficiently. She provides big-picture strategizing and analytical support to harmonize workflow and staff capacity. Nicole will work collaboratively with all program coordinators to orchestrate the overall implementation of this initiative. She will also serve as a point person for a selection of programs and continue to serve as the MHC's organizational liaison to Maine's library and K-12 school networks.

Dr. Meghan Reedy (she/her), Program Coordinator: Narrative and Content Development, leads the process to develop materials and content for use in all MHC programs. She will serve as one of the key point people on MHC Discussion Projects. Meghan also works closely with the Communications Team to describe and publicize the MHC's work and will continue to do that for this initiative.

Lizz Sinclair (she/her), Program Coordinator: Grants and Partnerships, leads the MHC's Grants program and serves as a key point person on programs involving new partners, programs, and partner-driven content. With a deep history at the MHC that has established powerful relationships with hospitals and Veterans organizations and growing relationships with the Wabanaki tribes, Lizz is a lead member of the Outreach Team, creating new partner outreach and partner relationship management strategies. Lizz also serves as the MHC's community liaison to priority communities. Lizz will focus on developing relationships with community partners and serving as the point person for programs during this grant.

J) Humanities Scholars and Consultants

Deep humanities scholarship is key to success of this initiative. Humanities scholars will be at the center of the planning and implementation, and we have sought the advice and direction of scholars from a variety of institutions and disciplines. Included among the scholars who will be advising and assisting with implementation are:

Judith Casselberry (Africana Studies, Bowdoin College) will serve as the primary advisor for the first year of the grant project, working closely with MHC and Bowdoin College's McKeene Center Fellow, Toshi Reagon, to organize and coordinate a series of community conversations based on Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. As an advisor and a collaborator, Dr. Casselberry will assist in providing supplemental materials for the community conversations, will liaise with Toshi Reagon, and will serve as a bridge between Bowdoin College

and the broader statewide community. Dr. Casselberry also serves as a speaker in our *Maine Speaks* series – her lecture entitled “Afrofuturism in 19th Century Black Spirituals” will be particularly relevant to this project. Her teaching and research agenda focus on Black American religious and cultural studies, social movements, and Black intellectual thought with particular attention to gender and liberation.

Daniel Minter (Co-Founder, Indigo Arts; Artist; Assistant Professor, Maine College of Arts) is a world-renowned artist and instructor who will serve as the primary advisor for the second year of the grant project. Minter’s work has been featured in numerous institutions and galleries, and he’s an award-winning illustrator of children’s books as well. Minter is also Founding Director of Maine Freedom Trails, where he helped to highlight the history of the Underground Railroad and the abolitionist movement in New England. For the past 15 years, Minter has also raised awareness of the forced removal in 1912 of an interracial community on Maine’s Malaga Island, an effort which was pivotal in having the island designated a public preserve. In 2019, Minter co-founded Indigo Arts Alliance, a non-profit dedicated to cultivating the artistic development of people of African descent. Minter will bring this extensive background to his community conversations that will form his involvement in the project.

Toshi Reagon (Musician, Composer, Producer) will serve as an advisor and presenter. She has been the recipient of a NYFA award for Music Composition, The Black Lily Music and Film Festival Award for Outstanding Performance, OutMusic’s Heritage Award in 2010, and a National Women’s History Month Honoree. Reagon is the co-creator and co-host of the podcast series *Octavia’s Parables*, a chapter-by-chapter analysis of Octavia Butler’s Parable series designed to inspire greater readership and thoughts around her books; and the composer/performer of *Octavia E. Butler’s Parables of the Sower*, an original opera with a history of worldwide performance. She will bring to bear her extensive knowledge of Octavia Butler’s work to the community discussions that she’ll hold in her part of this project.

Ian-Khara Ellasante (Bates College) served as a key advisor in the grant writing process. Dr. Ellasante studies the history and reclamation of Indigenous extra-binary gender systems and Two-Spirit traditions, Black and Indigenous feminisms, and the dynamic resistance inherent in Black and Indigenous trans and queer cultures. As a community-based participatory researcher, they have worked alongside and on behalf of LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit youth communities for over a decade. Dr. Ellasante, who is also an award-winning poet, will be one of the keynote speakers for our Big Question 2021 programming, which, while not included in this NEH grant cycle, will serve as a kick-off for our exploration of “What If…” (Please refer to the walkthrough for details).

Samantha Plasencia (Colby College), also served as an advisor in the grant writing process, has expertise that includes Afrofuturism, Afropessimism, and Black Studies. She researches how language shapes perception, the psycho-somatic experience of reality, behaviors’ rhetorical motivation, and how constitutive processes directed by anti-black apparatuses and institutions of power may they be redirected. In addition to serving as an advisor through the grant writing process, Dr. Plasencia will serve as a speaker and will be a collaborative partner on a Discussion Project for Colby College students, helping MHC fulfill our goals of program outreach within younger populations.

Abigail Killeen (Chair of the Department of Theater and Dance, Bowdoin College), will serve as a bridge between Bowdoin College and the broader Maine community. Dr. Killeen will be collaborating with Dr. Casselberry to serve as a liaison between MHC and Toshi Reagon. A theater artist, working as an actor, director, and producer, her performance research generates theatrical projects that place women in leadership roles: offstage as directors and producers, and onstage outside of traditional narratives, investigating themes of grace and transformation.

Robert Morrison (Religion and Middle Eastern and North African Studies, Bowdoin College) will serve as an advisor and speaker. Dr. Morrison is the Director of the North African &

Middle Eastern Studies Program and teaches Afrofuturism texts through the lens of religion and religious studies. His research has focused on the role of science in Islamic and Jewish texts, as well as in the history of Islamic science. Dr. Morrison has contributed the chapters on Islamic astronomy to the *New Cambridge History of Islam* and the *Cambridge History of Science*.

Arielle Saiber (Romance Languages & Literatures, Bowdoin College), will be an advisor, speaker, and discussion leader. Dr. Saiber researches and teaches Afrofuturism from a global perspective and is a scholar of science fiction. She publishes on Dante, medieval and Renaissance literature and mathematics, topics in “literature & science,” and early print history, as well as on science fiction, visual culture, and experimental electronic music, and built the web-based archive, *Dante Today: Sightings and Citings of Dante’s Work in Contemporary Culture*. In 2015 she built an extensive, on-going website for the [World Science Fiction](#) course she teaches at Bowdoin.

Lori Banks (Biology, Bates College) will collaborate on a Discussion Project for her student advisor group, helping MHC fulfill our goals of program outreach within younger populations. Dr. Banks is regularly listed as among top 30 Black women scientists in the country, and uses Afrofuturist concepts and texts in her biology classroom. Her laboratory focuses on understanding the key structural features of selected microbial proteins that can be exploited in the design of new anti-microbial agents.

In addition to the scholarly advisors above, program implementation throughout the project will be carried out in large part by the scholar/facilitators listed in Attachment 3. Program facilitators for Discussion Project sites and Readers Retreat small group discussions will be drawn from our pool of trained facilitators located throughout the state. Presenters for Maine Speaks programs will include project scholars listed above, as well as other from our Maine Speaks speaker roster. The Maine Humanities Council has more than 145 active facilitators and speakers: skilled discussion leaders and presenters who have been recruited by our outreach staff and trained by the MHC.

Work Plan

Over the course of this two-year project, we will be working with scholars and our program partners to plan and offer a total of 42 programs. During the project, multiple sites will be active simultaneously across various program formats. The scholarly advisory panel will meet at least four times, twice in 2022, and twice in 2023. Items listed in the Program Workplan below will be carried out by the Maine Humanities Council's Project Team, as detailed in Section I of the application narrative.

What If...? Program Calendar

Winter/Spring 2022

Large Format: Readers Retreat

Summer 2022

Small Community Groups: 6 sites begin (4 Discussion Project, 2 Maine Speaks)

Fall 2022 -

Small Community Groups 6 sites begin (4 Discussion Project, 2 Maine Speaks)

Toshi/Daniel: 3 sites (Community Conversation with Toshi Reagan)

Winter/Spring 2023

Small Community Groups: 6 sites begin (4 Discussion Project, 2 Maine Speaks)

Summer 2023

Small Community Groups: 6 sites begin (4 Discussion Project, 2 Maine Speaks)

Fall 2023 -

Small Community Groups: 6 sites begin (4 Discussion Project, 2 Maine Speaks)

Toshi/Daniel: 1 site (Community Project with Daniel Minter)

Winter/Spring 2024

Small Community Groups: 6 sites begin (4 Discussion Project, 2 Maine Speaks)

Toshi/Daniel: 1 site (Community Project with Daniel Minter)

What If...? Project Workplan

Winter/Spring 2022

Discussion Project

- Scholar/facilitator recruitment and interviews
- Applications for summer 2022 due from potential program sites April 1

- Reading and discussion program sites awarded summer 2022 programs
- Summer sites connected with scholar/facilitator; programs scheduled; books ordered
- Meet with Summer Facilitator Workshop advisors, outline agenda and goals
- Featured Reads 2023 book selection committee outreach and formation

Maine Speaks

- Scholar/speaker recruitment and interviews
- Applications for summer 2022 programs due from potential program sites April 15
- Summer 2023 program sites awarded and announced
- Sites connected with scholars
- Scheduling of summer events begins

Readers Retreat

- Book distribution to partner school districts, college classrooms, collaborating organizations
- Event marketing and registration
- Finalize evaluation tools
- Event May 20-21

Summer 2022

Discussion Project

- Summer 2022 reading and discussion programs begin
- Host orientation for new scholar/facilitator
- Finalize Featured Reads 2023
- Finalize 2023 evaluation tools
- Applications for fall 2022 due from potential program sites July 8
- Reading and discussion program sites awarded fall 2022 programs
- Fall sites connected with scholar/facilitator; programs scheduled; books ordered
- Summer Facilitator Workshop in August

Maine Speaks

- Host orientation for new speakers
- Summer events publicity and evaluations on-going; full Maine Speaks data review
- Scholar/speaker recruitment and interviews
- Applications for fall 2022 programs due from potential program sites August 12
- Fall 2023 program sites awarded and announced
- Sites connected with scholars
- Finalize 2023 evaluation tools

Readers Retreat

- Program data review and debrief

Toshi/Daniel

- Planning for community conversations with Toshi Reagan

Fall 2022

Discussion Project

- Fall 2022 reading and discussion programs begin
- Summer 2022 programs close; data review
- Applications for winter/spring 2023 programs due from potential program sites November 3
- Reading and discussion program sites awarded winter/spring 2023 programs
- Sites connected with scholar/facilitator; programs scheduled; books ordered
- Scholar/facilitator recruitment and interviews
- Planning for Winter Facilitator Workshop

Maine Speaks

- Events publicity and evaluations on-going
- Scholar/speaker recruitment and interviews
- Applications for winter/spring 2023 programs due November 18
- Winter/spring 2023 program sites awarded and announced
- Sites connected with scholars
- Scheduling of winter/spring events begins

Toshi/Daniel

- Toshi Reagan McKean Fellowship at Bowdoin College begins
- Community conversations with Toshi Reagan events publicity and evaluation on-going
- Planning for winter/spring 2023 event

Winter/Spring 2023

Discussion Project

- Winter/spring 2023 reading and discussion programs begin
- Fall 2023 programs close; data review
- Applications for summer 2023 programs due from potential program sites April 7
- Reading and discussion program sites awarded summer 2023 programs
- Sites connected with scholar/facilitator; programs scheduled; books ordered
- Host orientation for new scholar/facilitator
- Planning for Summer Facilitator Workshop
- Featured Reads 2024 book selection committee outreach and formation

Maine Speaks

- Winter/spring events publicity and evaluations on-going
- Scholar/speaker recruitment and interviews
- Applications for summer 2023 programs due from potential program sites April 14
- Summer 2023 program sites awarded and announced
- Sites connected with scholars
- Scheduling of summer events begins

Toshi/Daniel

- Portland performance of Toshi Reagan's *Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower*
- Full program data review and debrief

Summer 2023

Discussion Project

- Summer 2023 reading and discussion programs begin
- Winter/spring 2023 programs close; full Discussion Project data review
- Host orientation for new scholar/facilitator
- Applications for fall 2023 due from potential program sites July 7
- Reading and discussion program sites awarded fall 2023 programs
- Fall sites connected with scholar/facilitator; programs scheduled; books ordered
- Summer Facilitator Workshop in August
- Finalize Featured Reads 2024
- Finalize 2024 evaluation tools

Maine Speaks

- Host orientation for new speakers
- Summer events publicity and evaluations on-going; Maine Speaks data review
- Scholar/speaker recruitment and interviews
- Applications for fall 2023 programs due from potential program sites August 11
- Fall 2023 program sites awarded and announced
- Sites connected with scholars
- Finalize 2024 evaluation tools

Toshi/Daniel

- Planning for first Community Project with Daniel Minter

Fall 2023

Discussion Project

- Fall 2023 reading and discussion programs begin
- Summer 2023 programs close; data review
- Applications for winter/spring 2024 programs due from potential program sites due November 3
- Reading and discussion program sites awarded winter/spring 2024 programs
- Sites connected with scholar/facilitator; programs scheduled; books ordered
- Scholar/facilitator recruitment and interviews
- Planning for Winter Facilitator Workshop

Maine Speaks

- Events publicity and evaluations on-going
- Scholar/speaker recruitment and interviews
- Applications for winter/spring 2024 programs November 17
- Winter/spring 2024 program sites awarded and announced
- Sites connected with scholars
- Scheduling of winter/spring events begins

Toshi/Daniel

- First Community Project with Daniel Minter
- Planning for second Community Project with Daniel Minter

Winter/Spring 2024**Discussion Project**

- Winter/spring 2024 reading and discussion programs begin
- Fall 2023 programs close; data review
- Applications for summer 2024 programs due from potential program sites April 5
- Reading and discussion program sites awarded summer 2024 programs
- Sites connected with scholar/facilitator; programs scheduled; books ordered
- Host orientation for new scholar/facilitator
- Planning for Summer Facilitator Workshop

Maine Speaks

- Winter/spring events publicity and evaluations on-going
- Scholar/speaker recruitment and interviews
- Applications for summer 2024 programs due April 19
- Summer 2024 program sites awarded and announced
- Sites connected with scholars
- Scheduling of summer events begins

Toshi/Daniel

- Second Community Project with Daniel Minter
- Full program debrief/review

What If...?: Afrofuturism and the Quest for a Just, Inclusive, and Sustainable Society Walkthrough

The *What If...?* initiative will encourage Mainers to consider the questions “What kind of future do we want?” and “How do we create a more perfect union for ourselves and our successors?” and to begin to envision what it might take to manifest those futures. Our conversations with program partners across the state indicate that there is eagerness and an urgency for this type of exploration. This project will build on groundwork laid during the recent commemoration of Maine’s 200 years as a state; it will engage Mainers across the state in texts, discussions, talks, and workshops using Afrofuturism as a model for how to imagine futures, reimagine histories; and it will challenge assumptions of what is and is not possible. Across the state, communities will engage in discussions on racial justice, climate justice, food justice, religion and spirituality, and democracy and its possibilities - all issues of importance as we look to the future and which this genre explores so well. Because all Mainers have a stake in creating our future, we will partner with a wide variety of organizations across the state to offer five different program formats as entryways to engage as wide an audience as possible: (1) Readers Retreat, a dynamic, two-day deep dive into Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed* that will kick-off the project; (2) The Discussion Project, multi-session scholar-facilitated reading and discussion groups; (3) Maine Speaks, a humanities speaker program; (4) Community conversation programs with Toshi Reagon; and (5) Intensive/immersive community experience working with Daniel Minter, a nationally recognized Maine artist and teacher.

MHC has extensive experience offering community programming - such as Readers’ Retreat, Discussion Project, and Maine Speaks - in Maine and nationally. Over the past year, we have refined our programs, making them more accessible and equitable. For the special programs we will offer with Toshi Reagon and Daniel Minter, we are creating unique opportunities for Maine audiences. MHC works hard to earn trust and build strong, collaborative relationships with a variety of community organizations and scholars across Maine. Programs for this initiative will combine strong scholarship and humanities content with local communities’ concerns and interests. Through these programs we hope Mainers experience an increased sense of community and their value within it, a sense of their own agency, and experience the pleasure, power, and relevance of the humanities in their lives. This walkthrough provides an overview of each program, the partners and audience involved, and how it is structured.

1) READERS RETREAT 2022

“I’ve just been so, so pleased to watch the evolution of the Winter Weekend, which was a great program, into the even more impactful Readers Retreat and the diversity of titles being selected, related programming, outreach to new attendees, etc. I’m such a big admirer of all the work of MHC, but in recent years especially, really respect the work that’s clearly being put in to do better and be more inclusive and equitable in its offerings and focus. From me as a librarian and a human, thank you!” –
Marcela Peres, Director of Lewiston Public Library

Overview

Readers Retreat is a two-day event that brings together a diverse group of people for a deep dive into one primary text. Readers Retreat 2022, which will be held in May, will be a large public kick-off event for this initiative, taking attendees into the genre of Afrofuturism via Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1980). Readers Retreat occurs on an annual basis and is one of MHC’s largest public programs. In the past, we have hosted Readers Retreat on college campuses as a way to enhance the sense of an intellectual exploration of a text. We will continue this tradition by hosting the retreat on the beautiful and accessible coastal campus of Southern Maine Community College - its location offering attendees the opportunity to lean into the event’s “retreat” aspects.

The event consists of lectures and panel discussions provided by scholars and writers who are able to speak directly to the chosen text and the themes it addresses. Over the course of two days, attendees will have the opportunity to listen to lectures, listen to the selected speakers engage with each

other during panel discussions, participate in Q&A with speakers, and participate in small group discussion. The event opens Friday evening and closes Saturday evening, with the following schedule:

Friday

4:30-5:00: Welcome/Opening
5:00-7:00: Moderated speaker panel w/Q&A
6:00-8:30: Dinner

Saturday

8:30-9:00: Breakfast
9:15-10:15: Lecture
10:30-11:30: Lecture
11:30-12:45: Lunch
1:00-2:00: Lecture
2:15-3:15: Facilitated small group discussion w/participants
3:30-4:45: Closing

Program Development

Readers Retreat is a collaborative event – we work closely with scholars, community partners, advisors, and program participants to plan, create, and execute it. For our 2022 event, we have been and will continue to work with these collaborative partners from start to finish. Each Readers Retreat, we put forward a “book ballot,” with a list of potential texts, so that retreat attendees can vote for the book for the following year’s event. In anticipation of this Afrofuturism focus, in 2021, MHC worked with a small group of community-based advisors to select the texts for the book ballot. The advisors we worked with were writers and artists from the African Diaspora who are all well-versed in the genre of Afrofuturism, including Daniel Minter, who is an artist, scholar, faculty member at Maine College of Art, and a co-founder of an art-based non-profit in Maine. Minter will serve as a scholar-advisor for this NEH grant project. We collaborated with these advisors to create a book ballot that we then circulated virtually to the public via social media and our website. After two weeks of voting and over 120 votes, the general public selected Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed* as the book for Readers Retreat 2022. MHC staff will continue to work closely with community-based advisors in the planning of Readers Retreat 2022.

Scholars

While we are still in the early stages of planning details for Readers Retreat 2022 and have yet to confirm a full slate of speakers, we have been able to get confirmation from Dr. Sam Plasencia (Colby College), who is also an advisor for the *What If...?* project. Dr. Plasencia researches and teaches the genre of Afrofuturism, with broader expertise in Afrofuturism, Afropessimism, and Black Studies.

We have a list of other writers and scholars we are considering, and we’ve begun reaching out to them to assess their interest and availability. We are looking for speakers who will be able to situate *Wild Seed* in the historical and genre-specific context, while connecting the text to our current cultural moment. We’re particularly interested in speakers who can speak to Octavia Butler’s opus and its historical and present cultural impact. We are currently extending invitations to the following potential speakers: (b) (6)

[Redacted list of potential speakers]

Partners and Audience

The Readers’ Retreat is a ticketed event that is open to the general public. Approximately 150-200 people attend the event each year. Attendees are generally people with previous connections to MHC:

participants from other programs and events, community partners, and long-time devotees of the program. In the past, the majority of Readers' Retreat attendees have been older, white, retired Mainers, who have the time and the means to attend a fee-based event. In recent years, in our efforts to create more equitable programming – a key component of creating a more perfect union—we have altered our outreach strategies for Readers Retreat. We now engage more directly with our community partners and participants who have attended other MHC programming by including the Readers Retreat text on several of our Featured Reads reading lists for Discussion Project programming, thereby ensuring that a wide and diverse range of people will have read the text and will be interested in attending Readers Retreat. (For a fuller description of partners and audience, please refer to the Discussion Project, below). We offer reduced-cost tickets to community partners who have hosted Discussion Projects focusing on the book, which helps us offer this event to people with a variety of reading levels who come from different socio-economic, racial, and geographical backgrounds. In order to broaden age diversity among participants, we are collaborating with scholar-advisors from Bowdoin (Dr. Judith Casselberry), Bates (Dr. Lori Banks), and Colby (Dr. Sam Plasencia) to connect college students to Readers Retreat by adding the text, *Wild Seed*, to their syllabi and hosting connected campus-based Discussion Project programming.

We will continue outreach to a wide variety of people with diverse life experiences, using our Discussion Project programming and our relationships with partners to encourage participation in Readers Retreat 2022. As an example: over the past few years, MHC has been developing strong relationships with Adult Education programs across the state and with the state's Department of Corrections (DOC). Our relationship building with these two partners has resulted in over 20 Discussion Project programs being offered at Adults Eds and at DOC facilities each year. Several instructors with the Adult Ed programs have become facilitators and speakers, and participants in these Discussion Projects attend Readers Retreat and other MHC programming. We are particularly proud of the work we've been able to do at one DOC facility, the Southern Maine Women's Re-entry Center (SMWRC). In addition to programming, we've also been able to work with facility and the women incarcerated there to train a handful of facilitators who have been able to facilitate virtual Discussion Projects in the broader community. Earlier this year, we conducted a facilitator training specifically for women incarcerated at SMWRC to enable them to facilitate their own Discussion Project programs internally, without the need for an external facilitator from the broader community. This will allow them to continue hosting reading groups even after our events shift from virtual events to in-person events. This fall, women housed at SMWRC will be reading *Wild Seed* for their Discussion Project program.

2) DISCUSSION PROJECT: MULTI SESSION FACILITATED READING AND DISCUSSION GROUPS

"These discussions gave all of us a lot to think about and we got to have some challenging conversations in what I felt was a very safe space." Discussion Project Participant

Overview

Our dream is that anyone and everyone in Maine who wants to should have the opportunity to join in a rich, meaningful discussion with others about the humanities. Small, facilitated reading and discussion groups have been at the heart of MHC's programming for over thirty years. Our experience offering these groups across the state has shown us the power of what can happen when people come together around a humanities text. Whether the group members are linked by their work, where they live, their lived experience, or simple curiosity, the Discussion Project fosters real communication and connection among participants as they listen to one another and are listened to. Discussions are grounded in the group's shared experience of compelling texts. As participants interact and explore ideas and readings together with the guidance of a skilled facilitator, they often develop a sense of community and connection with one another, even across time and culture, where there may not have been one before. The results? As a librarian recently wrote, *"Even reluctant speakers become leaders in linking literature to their hopes and aspirations."*

These groups are held in collaboration with community partners—Maine’s libraries, municipal adult education programs, correctional facilities, and an increasing variety and number of community organizations across the state. Working together with our partners we can offer a broad range of Mainers opportunities to engage in discussion of big ideas and issues of ongoing importance. There is no charge to participate in a discussion project, and all materials and a facilitator are provided to the groups who host them to remove any barriers for participation. In this section, we will provide some examples of crucial components of our Discussion Project work: facilitator preparation, partners and audiences involved, and the structure and readings for the program.

Facilitator Preparation

“I have really enjoyed the moments when people realize that the book is complicated, either because it simplifies things too much or because it challenges things they thought they already knew...I enjoy asking them to think about what makes us uncomfortable and what is at stake with our discomfort? Leaving it open-ended allows readers to ... recognize that [authors] have important perspectives...but that does not mean that [they] close out the conversation with "right" answers on all things. - MHC Facilitator

Because our scholar/facilitators are such an important key to program success, we have been working steadily to revitalize, expand, and provide more support for our large core group of experienced facilitators. Having open applications, interviews and ongoing peer and staff support for facilitators helps us connect with a more diverse group of scholar/facilitators from across the state and increases our ability to host programs that deal with compelling and challenging themes. We mentor those with less experience facilitating public humanities discussions who we think are promising. The skilled, deep engagement with the humanities, commitment, and varieties of experiences our facilitators bring to this work have helped our programming go deeper and better reflect the communities we serve. New facilitators complete an orientation to prepare them for their role. They also observe other facilitators, and have opportunities to continue honing their facilitation skills through workshops, experiencing a text-based group discussion, and connecting with each other as a support network.

As part of this initiative, MHC will hold professional development opportunities for all potential and existing facilitators over the next two years to provide key skill building opportunities for our facilitators/scholars to facilitate well with Afrofuturist literature in the many settings where our programs will be held. Professional development opportunities for facilitators will include:

- Four workshops for scholars/facilitators per year;
- Four facilitator discussion project opportunities in which facilitators read and practice facilitating with Afrofuturist works of literature;
- Reciprocal peer observation and feedback opportunities; and
- Staff facilitated peer facilitator learning cohorts (organized geographically and by shared experience).

We will offer a workshop on “Facilitating discussions with Afrofuturist literature” as well as “Facilitating Anti-Racist Discussions.” In addition to providing a facilitator handbook and other staff and peer support, we design and develop topics for facilitator professional development workshops by surveying our facilitator network to understand their needs. MHC staff will facilitate the workshops and hire experts from within our partner network to help design and implement the trainings. The structure for the workshops would look much like this sample, including time for discussion, interaction, and reflection:

Trauma & Resiliency Informed Facilitation Training for Maine Humanities Council Facilitators

Arabella Perez, Director, "Thrive Initiative: A Trauma Informed System of Care" for State of Maine

Overview

Trauma and Resiliency Informed care provides a framework to understand and effectively come to terms with trauma and toxic stress, and foster resiliency. Trauma can often look like culture because it

has weathered the brain architecture and the nervous/cardiovascular/endocrine systems. Utilizing brain science, trauma theory, critical race theory, intersectionality theory, and trauma informed principles; facilitators can navigate the layers of harm, foster resilience, and persist in healing efforts.

Session 1: Information & Shared Language

1. Review trauma and toxic stress:
 - a. Acute, complex, historical, intergenerational (epigenetics), racialized, systemic
2. Review brain science and the impact that trauma and toxic stress can have on the various body systems.
 - a. The stress response cycle (activation, the 3 Fs)
 - b. Understanding Adaptive Behaviors/Coping Skills and how these skills are shaped by experience, i.e., race, SOGI
3. Review the role of resiliency and how it intersects with culture.

Session 2: Skill Building & Putting the Information into Practice

4. Identify strategies and skills that are trauma and resiliency informed I (group strategies):
 - a. Creating the container using the TRI principles
 - i. Trust, Safety, Choice, Collaboration, Empowerment, Social Justice
 - ii. How to co-regulate when activation happens
5. Practicing self-regulation skills
 - a. Self-awareness and reflection activities
 - b. Non-centering of self-strategies

We will ask new and seasoned facilitators to attend these workshops, which we will offer on a semi-annual basis. The topics covered may change in future workshops depending on facilitators' and MHC's needs. Workshops will provide important support for facilitators, draw on their expertise and experiences, and create a community of facilitators who can learn and draw support from one another.

Facilitators have told us that the workshops, orientations, focused staff support, peer-observation and mentoring, and facilitator book groups have helped deepen their understanding of their role, increased their facilitation skills, and helped them feel even more committed to offering opportunities for communities of all kinds to engage in these kinds of important conversations across the state. We are seeing the results of this work. One facilitator wrote: *"I feel like I gained so many new skills as a facilitator. I have never prepared so deeply for a group and I really enjoyed having the chance to work so closely with the texts."* A partner shared, *"Our facilitator was really good about building community groundwork ...I think that made us all more comfortable to talk, share, and discuss different ideas."*

Partners Involved

"I have witnessed townspeople who didn't know each other develop great friendships in the course of discussing literature...the scholars have, without exception, been of a caliber otherwise not available to us. The program removes economic barriers that might prevent some of our patrons from participating,"

All of the programs for this initiative involve partnerships with a wide range of community organizations from across the state. We support the work they do, introduce them to the power and pleasure of engaging with the humanities, and are better able to engage the diverse communities they are part of. Local libraries, municipal adult education programs, and correctional education programs are among our longest partnerships. We cultivate relationships that are dynamic by regularly asking for feedback, by asking what their communities are interested in, and by collaborating on initiatives like this that can help them deepen their work with those they serve. Libraries and adult education programs serve as important, and in many cases one of the only, cultural centers for the communities across Maine. All face challenges maintaining adequate staffing, working with tight budgets, and accessing materials and scholars. Whether in cities or in the rural towns that make up much of the state, we support one another's

missions to connect community members, broaden awareness and understanding of the world, and foster productive community conversations. Discussion Projects held with the Women's Re-entry Center, the Maine State Prison, and other correctional facilities have offered participants much needed access to books and opportunities to discuss them. Participants tell us that participating helps them develop a sense of community, decreasing their sense of social isolation; provides needed intellectual stimulation; and offers a space where they can formulate and share ideas about issues important to them with others. Many are at a point in their lives where the future is at the forefront of their minds. They are eager to read *Wild Seed* and other texts as grounding for discussions of justice, democracy, and shaping the future.

In order to engage even more Mainers in discussions for this initiative, we will build on the trust, strong relationships, and successes we have partnering with healthcare organizations, veterans, high schools, educators, domestic violence and sexual assault resource centers, the Abyssinian Meeting House, area agencies on aging, and a number of other kinds of local and statewide organizations to offer programs. All believe this is a moment for Maine to look to the future and have expressed enthusiasm for engaging their communities in discussions of the issues Afrofuturist texts raise. Many letters of support capture how energized partners are that conversations sparked by the books will not be happening in isolation, but will be held across the entire state. While the majority of partners for programming will have worked with us at least once, this programming will help build and deepen the level of engagement in challenging content and discussions in accessible ways. As our Outreach Team continues to connect with regions of the state and communities/organizations that we have identified as under-resourced in the humanities and/or marginalized, we expect that many new partners will also participate in this initiative.

Audience

"I realized I am almost always with people...who have similar backgrounds and think a lot like I do. It was such a surprise to be in this group at the library with people who had such different perspectives from me. It challenged me in ways I had not been in other groups- made me think differently...Where else could I experience this? It was a wonderful experience." – Discussion Project participant

Discussion Project programs will engage with 8-25 program participants and will involve a very wide cross-section of Mainers. The aim is to have sufficient perspectives for a robust conversation, on the one hand, and sufficient space for all present to speak, on the other. The audience will reflect the communities our partners serve or are part of. The groups will be distributed as widely across the state as possible, making sure that communities under-resourced in the humanities (especially in rural areas) and those who have been historically marginalized are aware of this opportunity and prioritized. We will build on outreach we have done and are doing to ensure that this happens.

The educational experiences and the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of participants varies widely, as do their life experiences. Groups include people who are incarcerated, in recovery, live in poverty, have endured trauma, have been marginalized, or are experiencing social isolation and disconnection. Other groups include people with class, racial, and economic privilege. Groups may include people whose families have lived in Maine for generations with those newly arrived to Maine from other countries. Some are specifically for people working within an organization (such as the staff at a domestic violence resource center), while others, such as those held at libraries, are open to the general public. On-line programs offer rare and valuable opportunities for people to gather from different parts of our mostly rural state. Groups offer rare opportunities for people to come together for the kind of civil, open discussions so important for our democracy. Another participant put it this way: *"I am more at ease with myself and the people around me because I have opened my mind to another experience."*

Discussion Project Structure

When applying to host a Discussion Project, organizations select readings and topics that best respond to how their communities wish to connect to the theme, *What if...?*. We have designed the program to be as easy as possible to host (i.e., we provide the books, a facilitator, and template fliers, press releases, invitations, strategies, and other promotional materials to partners, who take responsibility

for marketing their groups). Groups awarded a program select readings from a list of Afrofuturist texts carefully selected with the help of our scholars and advisors. The texts are chosen based on their connection to the initiative, the balance of voices represented, tone, readability, and genre to better ensure that the resulting collection is both challenging and accessible to participants, grounding participants' reflections and helping spark discussion. Groups may opt to read one or a series of 3-5 texts offering different perspectives on a given theme. They will vary in length, in style, and in genre; they may be stories, poems, novels, graphic novels and other art forms. We hope the texts will invite Mainers to make connections with their lives and consider Maine's future from a wide range of perspectives and voices in ways that surprise, enliven, inspire, inform, and expand understanding.

Groups come together at the host site for an hour and a half. Groups may meet 3-6 times at intervals of once a month, once a week, or at whatever the group decides. A facilitator encourages depth and breadth in the conversation, creating an atmosphere in which everyone has ample opportunity to share their ideas and questions. We are told that the groups enable meaningful, sometimes transformative, collective reflection; enhance mutual appreciation; and, crucially, that they are enjoyable. Participants commit to attending all of the sessions to build a sense of community and trust. To get a feel for how our reading and discussion programs are structured, here is an outline of one series we will offer:

“Afrofuturism & Africanfuturism: *What if...?*”

The texts offer an introduction to Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism, providing opportunities for readers to use a Black cultural lens to take in the past and the present and create a speculative future or an alternative present for us to grapple with. Issues for discussion raised by the texts include: racial justice, climate justice, food justice, religion and spirituality, and democracy and its possibilities. They are held either in person or via Zoom. Each meeting has an opening and time for discussion and reflection.

Meeting 1:

Opening- The facilitator:

- starts with an opening/grounding activity and introductions. This helps participants feel more personal connection with others, especially for on-line groups.
- shares a set of ground rules they can add to: Speak your truth, Lean into discomfort and into each other, Commit to non-closure, Embrace paradox, and Seek intentional learning, not perfection;
- makes sure participants see these discussions as an opportunity to find words that express the thoughts, ideas, and questions a reading raises for them and to listen as others do the same. There is no other end goal, no consensus opinion to generate;
- reminds the group that some pieces will draw them in, others may not: the important thing is to notice and find words for their responses.

Discussion:

- The facilitator guides participants through discussion of Afrofuturism and African futurism and the selected text, *Wild Seed* by Octavia E. Butler (Featured book of [Readers Retreat 2022](#)). Each facilitator generates open-ended discussion questions encouraging participants to explore the text, open up possible meanings and interpretations, speak to their lived experience through or via the text, and discuss the big ideas the text raises.
- Facilitators and participants often select key passages to read more carefully and discuss.
- Throughout the meeting, facilitators bring the discussion back to the text when needed and ensure everyone is given an opportunity to speak and listen.
- The facilitator ends with a preview and questions to consider when reading the next set of texts.

Meeting 2: Subsequent meetings follows the format of the first. Discussion agreements are reviewed, they share additional thoughts on pervious readings, and enter into discussion of the text for this session: *Of One Blood, or, The Hidden Self* by Pauline Hopkins (fiction). In this work, Hopkins

intended, in her own words, to “raise the stigma of degradation from [the Black] race” and its title, *Of One Blood*, refers to the biological kinship of all human beings.

Meeting 3: Discussion of reading: *Dark Matter, A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* edited by Sheri Thomas (science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction)

- This discussion will explore the deep sense of loss central to the Black Diaspora and the power experienced in these works to imagine first steps in changing the world.
- As this is the last meeting, the facilitator encourages participants to make connections between the works read in the series and to reflect on the themes they have explored throughout, with their lives, and to think about the future they would like to see. They can discuss how they would complete the question, “What if...?”
- Participants complete on-line feedback surveys in the last 10 minutes.

In between meetings, the facilitator and site partner check in about the previous session, sharing observations and suggestions. MHC staff sits in on a session to see how the discussions are going, offering support for the facilitator and site coordinator as needed who fill out reflection forms.

3) MAINE SPEAKS

“There is little access to this type of ‘big picture’ information- especially when you consider proximity of qualified speakers and fiscal limitations of smaller towns.” – Maine Librarian

Overview

The Maine Humanities Council has been offering free speaker programming to libraries for the past eight years. The program has proved to be a very popular with libraries, and as of last year, other community organization throughout the state, especially in Maine’s rural areas. MHC provides speakers for the program, who deliver a presentation that explores local, national, or global topics of interest. Each presentation is followed by community discussion. Organizations apply to host the program, and MHC makes selections in the same manner described with the Discussion Project. Applicants select topics from our Maine Speaks roster, and MHC connects them with scholars.

We will be specifically highlighting scholars who can speak on Afrofuturism and related topics, and talks rooted in history and experiences that can spark discussion and creative thinking around issues connected to our project themes. MHC has a group of carefully vetted scholars and practitioners throughout the Maine. Not only are they well versed in their area of expertise, they’re also skilled in delivering information, sharing knowledge, and highlighting their insights in ways that are engaging and accessible to the public. We utilize a variety of approaches to finding speakers. We rely on our existing, extensive network of scholars and partners as well as an on-boarding process for speakers. We work with speakers to ensure their talks add richness to the themes we are exploring, are engaging, and incorporate what we know makes the best presentations. Here is a sample outline of one presentation we will offer:

“Afrofuturism in 19th century Black Spirituals”

About the Presenter: Judith Casselberry is Associate Professor of Africana Studies at Bowdoin College whose teaching and research agenda focus on Black American religious and cultural studies, social movements, and Black intellectual thought with particular attention to gender and liberation. She brings a wealth of knowledge gleaned from life experience and academic research—embodied knowledge of Black women’s musical, cultural, and liberatory practices and deep intellectual and heart knowledge of historical, political, social, and cultural contexts in which Black people produce freedom.

Opening

- The host site welcomes everyone and introduces Dr. Casselberry

Presentation

- Dr. Casselberry will speak with audiences for approximately 45 minutes about what 19th century Black spirituals teach us about Afrofuturism. Using audio and visual images, she will show how nineteenth century Black spirituals laid the foundations for Afrofuturism as Black people collapsed time and space to take on transcendent identities that brought God and the battles and heroes of the Old Testament into their history while projecting liberation in the now and future. She will also explore how, through the spirituals, Black people insisted on the value of their ways of knowing and ways of expressing life, and insisted on the fullness of life—life, death, sorrow, and joy; they insisted on a future in the now.
- She'll explore a number of questions with the audience, including: What if we fully embraced the insistence of the spirituals—insisting on humanity, insisting on a divine ethical and moral vision?
- During the last 45 minutes, she engages the audience in discussion, sharing suggested readings.

Closing

- The host thanks Dr. Casselberry, shares information about related programming, and asks everyone to fill out the feedback survey MHC has created.
- The host site and presenter will complete reflection forms to share any insights, observations, and suggestions. MHC will use these, along with participant feedback, to assess and improve the program and to share feedback with the host site and speaker.

Partners and Audience

The range of partners and audience for Maine Speaks are the same as those for the discussion project, described above. Audiences have ranged from 10 to over 100.

4) PROGRAMMING WITH TOSHI REAGON - DETAILS

Overview

MHC will be collaborating with Toshi Reagon and scholar-advisors at Bowdoin College (Dr. Judith Casselberry and Dr. Abigail Killeen) to host three community conversations based on Octavia Butler's *Parables* series (*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*). From September 2022 – May 2023, Reagon will serve as a fellow at Bowdoin's McKeen Center for the Common Good and, through this fellowship position, will be spending time in Maine with two purposes: 1) organizing and performing a month-long run of her stage performance, *Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower Opera*; and 2) facilitating three community-based conversations in various locations in Maine. The opera, written by Toshi Reagon and her mother, scholar and Civil Rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon, will be hosted in Portland at the Merrill Auditorium. The production of the stage performance will be fully funded by Bowdoin College; MHC will be responsible for funding, organizing, and doing outreach for Toshi's community-based conversations.

Audience

MHC will collaborate with library partners in three locations to host these community conversations – Rockport, Bangor, and Lewiston. We chose these three locations because: 1) The populations in two of these three locations are in alignment with our outreach goals. MHC is continuing to focus our outreach efforts towards people in Maine who have been historically and are presently marginalized. Lewiston and Bangor both have large (for Maine) populations of Wabanaki people, immigrants, and people of color. 2) These towns are major hubs for the regions in which they are situated. Rockport, in particular, is located between two towns – Camden and Rockland - which both have vibrant humanities-based organizations and programming. We have already received hosting commitments from libraries in these towns.

We estimate between 25-50 people at each event. Our outreach for attendees will begin with community partners, particularly partners who have received programming from MHC. We will prioritize partners that have held Discussion Projects featuring either *Parable of the Sower* or one of Butler's other

texts highlighted in our Featured Reads lists. In all of our outreach, we will focus on community partners that are either led by people with diverse backgrounds (i.e., racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, class) or who serve people from diverse backgrounds. We are especially looking forward to bringing these community conversations to locations outside of Portland. As the largest municipality in Maine, Portland is often a magnet for exciting programming, but the focus on Portland leaves out the vast majority of the state because most Mainers living outside of Portland cannot make the trip to Portland to take advantage of the programming. For these community conversations, we have intentionally chosen three locations that are accessible to a wider percentage of Maine's vast rural population.

In these community conversations, Toshi will bring in the relevant themes of the text and the stage play – illness, empathy, pandemic, food justice, racial justice, climate justice, etc. – into the local Maine context. She is interested being in conversation with organizers, students, activists, scholars, and other people who are working to create change in their local communities. Toshi is excited to make these connections in the less urban areas of Maine, and is looking forward to learning more about how Mainers work to create equitable and just communities.

5) PROGRAMMING WITH DANIEL MINTER – DETAILS

Overview

We will work with artist and scholar Daniel Minter to create a community-based, immersive art and discussion experience in two towns in Maine. These public series of events will be hosted in 2023 and 2024, during the second year of this NEH grant. During the fall of 2023 and the spring of 2024, Minter will spend time in the towns of Belfast and Bangor, respectively, with the purpose of establishing meaningful relationships with the art institutions and community organizations there. Belfast boasts a very active and involved artist community, with well-established connections to MHC and the broader Belfast community. Bangor's arts community is also thriving – Minter is particularly interested in connecting with artists in that area from the Penobscot Nation, as their tribal lands are situated in close proximity to Bangor. MHC has some relationships with tribal-led organizations and have partnered with Wabanaki-led organizations to provide workshops for our facilitators. Establishing stronger and broader connections within Wabanaki communities is a priority for MHC's Outreach Team, and we are thrilled that Minter suggested the town of Bangor as one of the event sites.

Through this programming, Minter will first spend time getting to know the organizations we invite into partnership, like Waterfall Arts, a community-based arts center in Belfast. He will take time learning the needs and concerns of those communities and will gather an understanding of how they see the humanities as a way to speak to those needs and concerns. During three partner meetings, Minter will introduce Afrofuturism as a genre of artistic expression particular to Black Diasporic people. He will use several pieces of his already created sculptures and paintings as a tool for focus and discussion, allowing participants to explore Afrofuturist themes present in his pieces. Minter's time in each town will culminate in a large, public community event, in which people will have the opportunity to view Daniel's previously created art and will hear from Daniel and from the partnering organizations about their study of Afrofuturist art and its vision for a more just and equitable future for all people.

Audience

The initial four gatherings for these workshops will be small, with specific community partners being invited to engage with Minter in a more intimate setting. Our outreach will be focused towards art-based community organizations, Indigenous-led organizations, and organizations working with or being led by racially marginalized groups. The larger community events will be open to anyone in the town or in the surrounding area. We hope to capitalize on the swell of interest that will come from Toshi Reagon's previous community conversations in libraries in that region – one community conversation will be hosted at the Bangor Library and the other will be hosted at the Rockport Library, which is approximately a 30-minute drive from Belfast.