



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

Held in Trust

Remarks from NEH Chair Shelly C. Lowe (Navajo)

[Navajo greeting]

As Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, I would like to express how gratified the Endowment is to support the work of *Held in Trust*, a three-year partnership between NEH and the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation. Since 2020, NEH and FAIC have been working together to assess the current state of conservation in the United States and identify opportunities for reflection and growth. Together, our organizations envision a future where conservation doesn't merely survive but thrives in a collective commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage and the stories that these objects and places embody.

In 1965, the United States Congress founded NEH with the charge to create “a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.” For nearly 60 years, the agency has funded programs to protect our cultural heritage, facilitate research and scholarship, and nurture current and emerging preservation professionals. The *Held in Trust* project—and in particular the April 2023 national convening—seeks to offer a “state of the field” and an opportunity to stand at the intersection of cultural heritage conservation and current issues of urgent importance, including racial equity and climate.

These efforts are part of NEH's new initiative, *American Tapestry*, and supports our 250th commemoration interests through our *A More Perfect Union* efforts. The initiative draws upon the insights of the humanities to help us connect the American future with the American past and cherish this inheritance for future generations by providing funding for humanities-based programs that foster a thriving democracy, expand opportunity and access for all Americans, and help us understand our relationship to the natural world. The places, objects, and intangible heritage are essential to telling these stories and bringing the humanities to all people in a personal and meaningful way.

The work of *Held in Trust* is focused on preserving these stories, teachings, experiences—and objects—that ground us in the humanities. In my time growing up on the Navajo reservation, followed by a career that took me physically away from that community, I've seen how preservation of culture can nourish people and communities.

Tangible and intangible heritage is vital to instilling values, promoting healing, and fostering connections. Most notably seen in Indigenous ceremonies where tribal histories and essential teachings are repeated through song, prayer and community togetherness, humanities are the foundation of these essential practices. This understanding makes it clear to me that the humanities have never been more vital to our world and society than they are today.

The *Held in Trust* work will continue beyond NEH's involvement with the project, and offer insights into how the conservation and preservation community can come together to tackle some of today's biggest challenges: systemic inequality, the effects on our environment due to a changing climate, and threats to democracy worldwide. I believe that telling stories through the humanities takes courage, precisely because it requires us to look for the causes and effects of painful and difficult histories and topics.

Implementing the recommendations that come from the *Held in Trust* steering committee, advisory board, and working groups will require the full investment of the conservation community, government, private funders, and cultural heritage stewards throughout the United States. Already, though, these groups have identified the climate crisis as the largest existential threat to collections and sites. Rising energy costs threaten financial stability, natural disasters threaten buildings, and climate-related diaspora threatens communities. NEH has responded by providing funding to the *Held in Trust* team to rapidly develop resources to help cultural organizations identify climate-related threats to their sites, collections, and programming and work through basic planning efforts to increase resilience and sustainability. While these resources cannot fully bridge the knowledge gap, I believe it is essential for NEH to take a leadership position in implementing the key findings of *Held in Trust* and supporting cultural institutions most impacted by climate change.

I want to leave you with a few words that I think of often, and I feel are especially relevant for this moment in history. They are from U.S. poet laureate Joy Harjo, and her recent Norton anthology of Native American poetry. And whenever I hear or reflect on these words, they remind me how truly vital our work in the humanities is, and cultural heritage can be a touchpoint to help lead us through difficult circumstances. For the title of the anthology, Joy and her editors chose the words: "When the light of the world was subdued, our songs came through." Through this partnership with FAIC, I hope that *Held in Trust* will not only allow the songs to come through, but to be sustained and preserved for future generations to hear.