

Welcome!

On behalf of the staff and National Advisory Board of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life (IA), and with gratitude to our co-hosts Emory University, Alternate ROOTS, the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Kennesaw State University, and Auburn University, we're delighted to welcome you to Imagining America's 14th national conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Together, over the next three days, we'll be advancing our understanding of IA's role in the work of our conference theme, "Organizing. Culture. Change."



Timothy K. Eatman

Since our appointment as faculty co-directors in August 2012, we've been keenly aware that a new, collective sense of "us"—of who we are—is emerging in the consortium. This sense of collective identity is important. It represents what Marshall Ganz refers to in his public narrative framework as the Story of Us. As we have read Ganz's work, and the work of many other narrative scholars, our belief in the deep strategic power of story as a way of knowing and learning has grown.



Scott Peters

Recently we were fortunate to experience a break-through moment that brought considerable clarity to our understanding of how we might use narrative and story to advance our collective task of composing a new Story of Us. The moment occurred during the June 2014 cultural organizing institute at Emory University. At the institute, IA staff joined artists and scholars from several IA member institutions and the Atlanta community to explore the potential of combining tools, strategies, and concepts from cultural and broad-based organizing. Led by our own Kevin Bott, much of the time we were on our feet, engaging in embodied and creative expression. With the help of our colleague Maria Avila, we participated in analytic exercises like power mapping and critical discourse around the larger national narratives within and about higher education. And, perhaps most importantly, we told stories about our experiences and work—stories that revealed not only the great potential and promise of our consortium, but also the things still standing in the way of transformation.

On the second day of the institute, an urgent conversation emerged about the need for us, as a consortium of publicly engaged artists and scholars, to move from isolated views of “I” to a shared view of “we.” As the conversation moved on to expressions of despair about siloed academic departments and feelings of isolation for some colleagues within their institutions, National Advisory Board member Carol Bebel stepped forward and shook our worlds. Wisely and boldly, she spoke about the important project in our fractured world of “weaving the we.” She expressed gratitude about the chance to be part of a growing movement that was taking up this project. When someone asked, “Where and how can IA contribute to what you’re talking about?” she responded by pointing out how we had been doing it together over the past few days, right at the institute.

That brief moment when Carol spoke these words lifted our spirits and gave us clarity and courage. It inspired us. For that we want to say publicly, “Thank you, Carol Bebel!” What makes Carol’s imagery of weaving a sense of “we” so powerful is the way it animates our consortium’s grounding in the arts. The act of weaving carries with it an artistic imperative; it is an intentional, imaginative, and purposeful process through which something dynamic and new is crafted from material that already exists. Carol’s beautiful and wise words have led us to reflect on the many ways and places we have seen and experienced the weaving of a “we” in our travels across the country this past year, and in the work our members are taking up in their campuses, communities, and lives.

This year’s conference invites and compels us to find our place in this work by creating bridges, forming alliances, and inspiring collective action. Building on the dialogue and work of the consortium during the 2012 conference in New York City and the 2013 conference in Syracuse, NY, it is structured as a space for expressing and crafting public narratives, for building and strengthening meaningful public relationships, and for advancing scholarly research. This year more than ever we’ve been more intentional about bringing the bold power of the arts, humanities, and design to bear on our collective ideas and conversations, and our individual creative agency.

We’re especially delighted to be meeting this year in Atlanta. Arguably still the capital of the South, Atlanta remains a city of dichotomies, a city that struggles to maintain the best aspects of its region while embracing change and facing up to its challenges. The city’s legacy as home to civil rights activists and organizations holds promise for those who seek to use the arts and humanities for democratic renewal and grassroots social

change. Through our conference partnership with the new National Center for Civil and Human Rights in downtown Atlanta, we have the opportunity to engage with this innovative site, which joins together the powerful strands of organizing culture change in America's history with a potent call to action for those working for equity and justice today.

Before we close, we'd like to share a few key developments in IA's activities that we're delighted to report:

- Syracuse University's professor of design, James Fathers, took leadership of IA's new Commission on Publicly Engaged Design.
- Teams on thirteen IA campuses have been organizing events for Extension Reconsidered—a national IA initiative that is engaging a diverse range of participants in constructive and critical deliberation about the future of the land-grant system's extension work—with a focus on its roles in building a democratic culture with methods and resources from community arts, public humanities, and design.
- A group of Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) Fellows took the initiative to attend Chicago Freedom Summer 2014 in commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of Freedom Summer 1964, and shared their reflections on the IA blog.
- As co-directors, we traveled to New Orleans for the 50th anniversary of the founding of Free Southern Theater, and celebrated with Dudley Cocke from Roadside Theater in Appalshop, and Carol Bebel from Ashé Cultural Arts Center. Together, we experienced a moment ripe with possibility as we witnessed the first inaugural class of College Unbound graduates.
- IA is collaborating with the Association of American Colleges and Universities on a joint issue of Diversity and Democracy, which will examine publicly engaged scholarship and teaching, to be released in winter 2015.
- IA has partnered with the United States Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC), a national initiative launched at last year's conference in Syracuse, to support its inaugural cohort of cultural agents.
- Several key works were published by IA members, including:
 - David Cooper's *Learning in the Plural: Essays on Humanities and Public Life*, which features a forward by Julie Ellison and an afterward we wrote as IA co-directors.

- Jack Tchen's *Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, a unique and fascinating archive and a modern analysis of the crucial historical formation of yellow peril ideology.
- Julie Shayne's *Taking Risks: Feminist Activism and Research in the Americas*, a 350+ page anthology in SUNY's "Praxis: Theory in Action" series, which stemmed out of a session at the 2010 IA conference in Seattle.

These powerful examples are, of course, only a fraction of this past year's work. They reveal not only IA's growing impact, but also a powerful sense of a "we" in the making. We are called to translate this "we" into a "Story of Us" that helps us know who we are and how we should act to address the urgent stories of "now" we see and hear in our nation and world, and our own respective campuses and communities. Over the next three days, we look forward to working together, as we listen to stories and share our own, while keeping "weaving the we" in mind.

Sincerely,



Tim Eatman and Scott Peters
Faculty Co-Directors