



FALL | WINTER 2024

OKLAHOMA
HUMANITIES

CULTURE | ISSUES | IDEAS

FABRIC



CAROLINE LOWERY

Executive Director
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PERSPECTIVE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As the year draws to a close, I am filled with immense gratitude for the many ways we have come together to strengthen our mission. This past year has been one of intentional growth, increased service to communities, and the impactful partnerships, old and new, that have made it possible.

We partnered with the Oklahoma Department of Corrections to launch a new chapter of our literature-based reading and discussion program, *Let's Talk About It (LTAI)*, in centers of incarceration and provided a space for thoughtful reflection and dialogue. Six sites hosted this year and nine more are already scheduled for Spring 2025.

With the support of 4-H, we continued our partnership with the Smithsonian Institution's *Museum on Main Street* program and brought the traveling exhibit, *Voices and Votes: Democracy in America*, to small towns across our state and amplified the stories and cultural heritage of rural Oklahomans.

We forged new partnerships with universities, museums, cultural centers, health centers, arts festivals, smalltown bookstores, and ESL programs to expand distribution of the Spring/Summer GO issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine.

We encouraged middle and high school students to engage in deep historical inquiry by once again partnering with the Oklahoma Historical Society on National History Day. This year, thousands participated statewide, with some focusing on the history of Federal Indian Boarding Schools in Oklahoma—a topic critical to understanding our shared past and present.

We marked significant progress in our financial sustainability, raising more than \$80,000 for our endowment, including \$20,000 in matching funds from the Kirkpatrick Family Fund, through the Oklahoma City Community Foundation. Additionally, we successfully redistributed more than \$250,000 in federal funding to all five of Oklahoma's congressional districts, furthering our commitment to strengthening the humanities across the state.

In September, we proudly partnered with the National Endowment for the Humanities to host *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture*, a national convening in Oklahoma City (see p.44) that brought thought leaders, cultural advocates, and community partners together in conversation about the vital role the humanities play in fostering connection and understanding.

And we'll close out the fiscal year by partnering with the Oklahoma Museums Association to host a *Summit for Oklahoma Museums in Route 66 Communities* as part of a larger effort to prepare for the centennial celebration of the Mother Road in 2026.

As we look toward next year, we aim to build upon this year's success and are filled with hope and anticipation. Thank you for your ongoing support and commitment to our shared mission. Together, we are creating a richer, more connected future through the humanities and through each other.



OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Culture | Issues | Ideas

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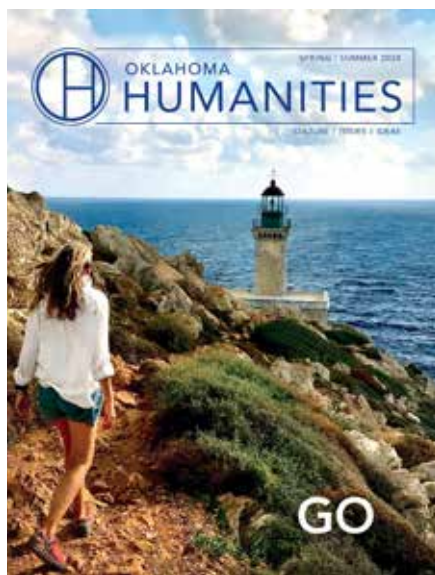
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Reader Feedback



FROM OUR GO AUTHORS:

What a great issue, I'm proud to be a part of it. I very much appreciate seeing Shelly Lowe's statement and the article on Riverside and the federal initiative.
—K. Tsianina Lomawaima

WOW! This is fantastic. Thank you so much for featuring my essay and for making me a cover girl (a first and surely a last!). David will very much appreciate that you used his image and I'm really very deeply honored that you reprinted my piece.
—Alexis Adams

Our good friend Jeremy Springer was recently on the go with his issue of GO. Thanks, Jeremy, for reminding readers that the magazine is accessible online anytime or any place. Including Waylan's Ku-Ku on Route 66 in Miami, Oklahoma!

FROM OUR RECENT READER SURVEY:

The most recent issue, particularly the article from Professor Anderson about losing her wife, was especially moving. It was such an honest and open essay on grief and how we all process it, and I think it's a conversation worth having.

[On "Federal Indian Boarding Schools Still Exist"] I was surprised to learn some were still open. Riverside sounds like a wonderful school whose students are happy to attend. The turnaround of such an infamous place is amazing.



Jay & Valerie Hannah
Darryl Smette
The Springer Company
William M. Woodard

THE 2024 EDITOR'S CIRCLE

Donors who designate gifts of \$500 or more for *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine are printed in the Editor's Circle. Thanks to these generous donors, we distribute this award-winning publication free of charge, to Oklahomans in all 77 counties. Thank you—we're grateful for your generosity!

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Oklahoma Humanities magazine is an award-winning collection of cultures, issues, and ideas—a rich mix of humanities scholarship, insightful narratives, informed opinions, and beautiful images, for a read that is smart, balanced, educational, and entertaining. Published twice a year, it reaches Oklahomans in all 77 counties and is free of advocacy and advertising, supported by donors like you.

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To everyone who donated to the magazine this spring as part of our fundraising match with The Springer Company and OG&E, thank you! We could not do our work without you.

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SIDENOTE

KIMBERLY ROBLIN
kimberly@okhumanities.org

Fabric: borrowed from Middle French & Medieval Latin; Middle French *fabrique* “**act of construction**, something **created**...” borrowed from Medieval Latin *fabrica*, going back to Latin, “**process of making** something, craft, art, workshop.” [from Merriam Webster]

Ira Lee sewed the sun and sky into my quilt the year I was born, sprinkling a cream calico among the singular shades of pink and blue that make dawn and dusk so beautiful in our state. Every night I fell asleep tucked into an Oklahoma sunset and every morning awoke under a sunrise. The quilt connected me with my grandma then and the quilt connects me with my grandma now, decades after she’s been gone.

I can’t sew the sun and the sky like she could. Full disclosure, I don’t sew at all. But as a curator and now an editor, I stitch together strands of a different sort—making connections among ideas, times, places, and people. I pull at threads, and I follow them. In this issue, fabric is not just a theme, but an invitation to consider the world through warp and weft. The more we look for and expect intersections and connections, instead of divisions and differences, the more we find.

As the following articles reveal, these connections can run deeper, older, and in different directions than we might expect. We’ll trace the origins of African wax cloth across 8,000 miles and the Indian Ocean; contemplate the power of fiction to move minds; meet early-twentieth century immigrants who fought for labor laws that protect American workers today; traverse conflict and continents with Hmong refugees; explore the legacy of trench warfare on our wardrobe; and trace a celebrated California poet to her red-dirt, Dust Bowl-childhood.

But there’s another fabric as well, made of paper, ink, images, and articles. Graphic designers, authors, and editors. Distributors who share it and the donors who support it, keeping it free of ads and free of charge. And you, our 12,000+ readers who form a community from diverse backgrounds, cultures, careers, and interests. Teachers and students. Immigrants and artists. Farmers, veterans, lawyers, and librarians. People experiencing incarceration. Retirees and registered nurses. Oklahomans, Buckeyes, New Yorkers, Californians, Kansans, and more. Too many to list. Together, we make *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine.

When you send us comments and questions, you help us determine what we’re doing well and what we can improve. When you complete surveys, you influence future content. When you pass along an article to friends or colleagues, you grow our readership and start conversations. When you mention us, you raise awareness about the work we do, and you join us in our mission.

FABRIC might be my first issue as editor, but the invitation will always stand. Let’s consider the world through warp and weft. Let’s stay curious and look for the connections among ideas, events, experiences, and ourselves. Let’s add dimension and context. The more we look, the more we’ll find; and the more we find, the more we’ll look. Let’s pull some threads and see where they lead.

WANDERING SPIRIT

AFRICAN WAX PRINTS



Wax prints, Ajame Market in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, March 15, 2019. Eva Blue, unsplash.com



In February 2024, Oklahomans had the opportunity to experience a unique and beautiful exhibition when *Wandering Spirit: African Wax Prints* opened at the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities in Tulsa.

It traced the history of African wax prints along colonial trade routes, across three continents, and through globalization in the post-colonial era, affirming that although not originally African, wax prints are ingrained in African culture where people love and identify them as their own.

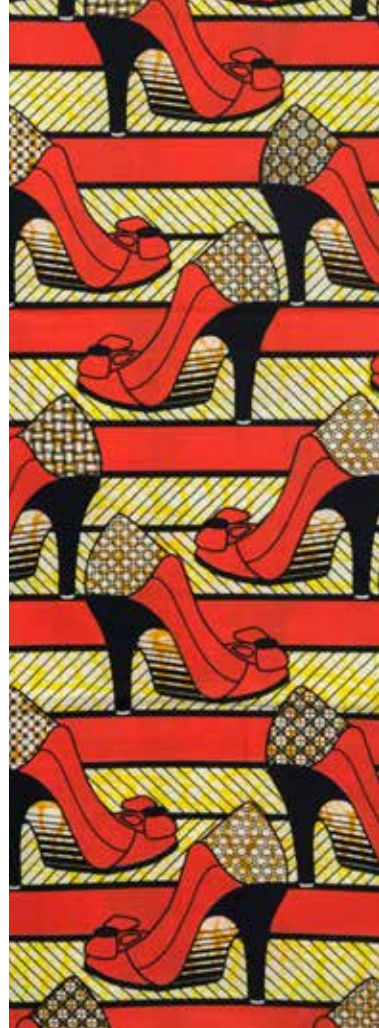
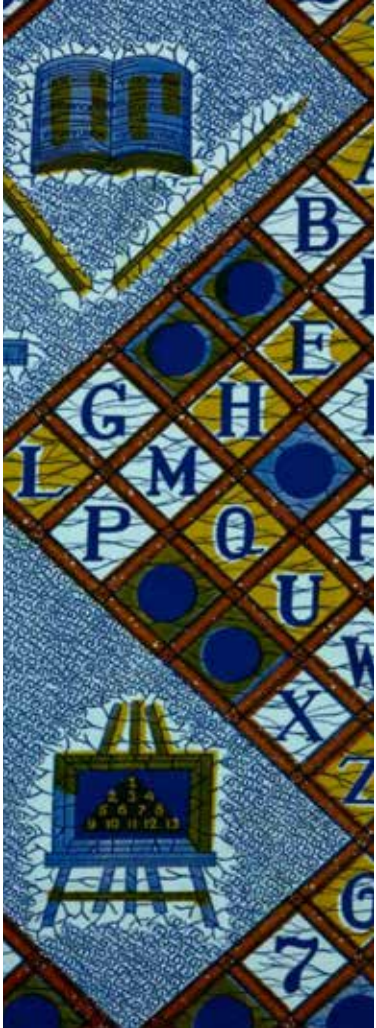
The exhibition is personal for curator Dr. Gifty Afua Benson, who grew up in a large family in Ghana where the bright and bold patterns of wax prints infused her childhood—patterns like *Bulls Eye*, *Day and Night*, *ABC*, *Precious Stones*, *Nkrumah's Pencil* (named for Ghana's first president), and Dr. Benson's favorite—*Happy Family*, a mother hen surrounded by her chicks that emphasizes the role of women in the family.

A professor at Tulsa Community College and former pediatric dentist, Dr. Benson decided to create the exhibition after seeing similar displays in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, but none in North America. It took two years to develop and initially traveled through ExhibitsUSA from 2016–2021, touring twenty cities in fifteen states: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

With approximately seventy wax prints that span decades, the exhibition is an introduction to both the past and present of these cloths. The older pieces are from Dr. Benson's personal collection and about half of them belonged to her mother. In West African cultures, wax prints are often an inheritance, a testament to their monetary, historical, and cultural value.

"The cloth makes me happy," she says. "It reminds me of my heritage. It reminds me of my mother." Dr. Benson has taken wax prints, long used to make clothing, and fashioned something else entirely—an exhibition that celebrates and shares the fabric of West African culture.

The following is adapted from the exhibition text with the permission of Dr. Benson and ExhibitsUSA.



The origins of African wax prints lie not in Africa, but in Indonesia, specifically the handmade batiks made by applying warm liquid wax in a pattern to both sides of cotton fabric using a small brass, spouted cup called a *tjanting*. After the wax cools and solidifies, the cloth is dyed with a primary color, usually indigo. The wax is then removed and reveals the undyed pattern. The areas that are to remain indigo are then covered with wax, and a secondary dye, such as sago brown, is applied. All the wax is then removed from the fabric and any remaining undyed area is filled in by hand with different colors to create a rich, vibrantly colored cloth.

In the 1800s, Dutch cotton printing mills started making less expensive, industrialized alternatives to

this labor-intensive fabric for export to what was then the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), a colony of the Netherlands. J.B.T. Prévinaire, the Belgian founder and owner of the Haarlemse Katoen Maatschappij (HKM) textile mill, established a laboratory exclusively to study dyes and pigments and improve on ways to make the Javanese printing technique less laborious. In 1854, he patented “La Javanaise,” a converted French printing machine that could industrially print imitation batik.

Successful for a time, the imitation batiks could not compete long-term with Javanese textiles. The industrial process created an unappealing and imperfect crackling effect in the pattern not seen in the original fabrics.

LEFT TO RIGHT: *King's Chair*, ca. 1980s, manufactured by Vlisco, Netherlands. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license; *ABCs*, manufactured by Vlisco, Netherlands. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license; *Heart of Barack*, named for Barack Obama and introduced 2007, manufactured by Vlisco, Netherlands. Dutch Super Wax on cotton. Courtesy of Beatrice Benson Collection; *Michelle's Shoes*, named for Michelle Obama and introduced 2011, manufactured by Vlisco, Netherlands. Dutch Super Wax on cotton. Courtesy of Beatrice Benson Collection.

At the same time, the local Javanese industry had also started using the *tjap* (cap), a copper block stamp for printing fabrics. This new technique made Javanese batik less labor-intensive and cheaper than even the Dutch prints.

As a result, European printers looked for new markets to sell the Dutch wax prints and ultimately identified West Africa, already a textile trading hub that had imported calico, chintz, gingham, linen, and more for centuries. Success was swift and sustained. As anthropologist Anne Grosfilley noted, “these industrial prints inspired by Javanese batiks were ideal: light material, but with an indigo base—they were exotic in a way, but also had some similarities with the West African traditional local tie-dye.” Working with local traders, companies like HKM gathered information on customers’ preferences and adapted their designs to better suit African tastes.

Until World War I, HKM was the standard-bearer and leading exporter of Dutch wax block prints in the Netherlands. Unequaled in printing quality and diversity of patterns, they enjoyed a peak production of about six million yards annually before the beginning of the war. In 1917, an exports bottleneck forced them to eventually stop production and in 1918, the company was liquidated. Other Dutch companies like Van Vlissingen & Company (renamed Vlisco in 1927) and Ankersmit bought HKM’s machines, patterns, and collections, and these two companies successfully became leaders in the market until 1929, when the global depression bankrupted their remaining competitors. After several decades of competition, Vlisco finally absorbed Ankersmit in 1964.

Today, Vlisco is the only European-based company that produces and exports wax prints to Africa. It carries the same amount of prestige as high-end western brands such as Michael Kors, Louis Vuitton, and Burberry. West Africans pay a

**THOUGH CREATED IN
THE NETHERLANDS, OUR
DESIGNS COME TO LIFE IN
AFRICA WHERE TRADERS
AND CUSTOMERS NAME
THEM. — VLISCO**



FAR RIGHT: *Large Snail*, manufactured by Vlisco, Netherlands. Dutch Java Print on Damask-Bazin. Courtesy of Beatrice Benson Collection. RIGHT: Young child on the Ivory Coast. November 28, 2023. Ben White. unsplash.com

premium for European-made prints, even though West African and Chinese-made prints are available and less expensive. Vlisco currently introduces a new collection to the market four times a year, and some productions are of limited editions.

They produce three types of wax prints. All are printed on 100% plain cotton or on Damask-Bazin, a reversible figured fabric that can be made with cotton, linen, silk, or wool, with patterns formed by weaving to create a layered effect.

The **Wax Block** is recognizable by the layering of color, design, and printing on both sides of the fabric, with hot resin creating crackles. No two bolts are identical. The wax block has become a ubiquitous cloth throughout Africa, particularly in the west.

The **Java Print** does not utilize resin in the printing process. The crackles that are the hallmark and character of wax prints are absent, making the pattern repetition identical. Unlike the wax block print, the Java print is printed only on one side. During this process, a great amount of pressure is applied to saturate the dye through the fabric.

The **Super Wax** uses very fine quality cotton and has two core colors and a marbled pattern. It is the most expensive of the wax prints.

Wax print fabric is traditionally sold in lengths of six yards (roughly five and a half meters), which is enough to make a complete outfit. Two yards are used for a long skirt (sometimes this length is simply tied around the waist as a pagne or “wrapper,” so it covers the legs



from hip to ankle), two yards for a tailored top that is usually a peplum (kaba), and the remaining two yards for a sling. The sling has many applications. It can be used as a head tie or as a decorative shawl hung over one shoulder (or both shoulders for warmth in cold weather). Each complete outfit is designed and custom-made by a dressmaker. The logo of the fabric maker is always imprinted on the selvedge of each fabric to authenticate and label the wax print for consumers.

Clothing in Africa serves as an important means of communicating a person's social status and position, ambition, marital status, ethnicity, age, sex, and group and tribal affiliations. Certain colors are related to birth (white) or bereavement and mourning (black and red). Wax prints are also used as courting presents and are an essential component of a woman's dowry. Commemorative portrait editions are printed to reflect political parties or independence from colonial rule. Group affiliations and the solidarity of an occasion are expressed when guests all don the same fabric, pattern, and color.

The continued success of wax prints on the African scene is driven by many factors, such as local culture, taste, and desires. Fabric designs that don't align with them fail to thrive and disappear very quickly. Successful patterns are perennial and remain in production over many years. The oldest pattern has been produced for more than eight decades.

The European manufacturers identify them solely by number. This industry practice has given market traders and consumers the freedom to name the fabrics themselves and thereby attach parables, implied meanings, and secret messages to each fabric. Custom-made names identify each wax print. "Though created in the Netherlands, our designs come to life in Africa where traders and customers name them," says Vlisco. Through naming the material, Africans give it meaning and make it their own.

The names and stories associated with the fabrics differ from country to country and region to region. The name of the wax print may be in English, French, or in one of the hundreds of African local languages or dialects. Essentially, the names given to the wax prints are descriptive, communicative, and expressive. In recent years, the names have become more international, signaling a new modern African consumer with global connections.

"Wax prints might not be originally African," says curator Dr. Benson, "but we have come to embrace them as our own. There is a story, our story, to every fabric."

Adjame Market in Abidjian, Ivory Coast.
March 15, 2019. Eva Blue. unsplash.com



Bohls of fabric. June 19, 2022. Iwaria Inc. unsplash.com

A CRAZY QUILT THE UNITED STATES



BY RILLA ASKEW

Following the turbulent 1930s, Oklahoman Woody Guthrie penned his famous lyrics *This land is your land, this land is my land*, and the song is still widely sung in schools, at rallies, and community celebrations. Often, though, it seems that only the second half of the chorus is really meant—this land is *my* land. This land is *our* land. Meaning people who look like me, speak like me, have the same histories as me. How do we stand united as Americans when there seems to be so much that divides us? Books can be a great starting place. They foster cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and community resilience by introducing readers to works that recognize the myriad ways we are *they*, and *they* are *us*.

These books look at our shared but separate histories—rich, complex, wounded, inspiring—which we may not think of as belonging to all

of us. And yet they do. Each is a piece of the American tapestry, a narrative that has played out in especially dramatic, sometimes violent, always compelling ways in Oklahoma. These four books—two novels, a collection of stories, and a collection of essays—ask interwoven questions: What does it mean to be ‘American’? Whose America is it? Who gets to be called ‘American,’ and who decides that identity?

Our master narrative often calls this nation a melting pot, but the United States is most definitely not a melting pot. We do not blend and stew our cultures and histories together to create one uniform bland mush. A more apt metaphor is the crazy quilt: all the myriad fabrics and textures and colors stitched together, situated uniquely side by side, inextricable, all of a piece, and yet tightly connected, lest the whole quilt come undone.

RILLA ASKEW is the author of five novels, two books of stories, and a collection of creative nonfiction. Her novel about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, *Fire in Beulah*, received the American Book Award in 2002. She has received three Oklahoma Book Awards, two Western Heritage Awards, the Arrell Gibson Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Arts and Letters Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She teaches creative writing at the University of Oklahoma.

Most American: Notes from a Wounded Place

by Rilla Askew

In this collection of creative nonfiction essays, I propose that Oklahoma, although often obscured in the national narrative, is, in fact, the most American of places. To me, Oklahoma's story is the American story: complicated, riven, filled with both woundedness and hope. In nine linked essays covering topics from the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Trail of Tears, snake killing to killer tornadoes, I look at how this state's history reflects the national narrative. I trace my own awakening to the privileges and presumptions of whiteness I grew up with in eastern Oklahoma as I seek to uncover and examine hidden histories I didn't know about or understand. The work covers varied landscapes, from my family's home territory in southeastern Oklahoma to the Cherokee hills around Tahlequah to the powerful Wichita Mountains in the southwest. Taken together, the essays consider how this state's heritage of migration and ethnic cleansing, heroism and racial violence, self-sacrifice and greed reflect the whole of the American paradox: what is best and worst in us.

Citizens Creek

by Lalita Tademy

This rich multi-generational novel focuses on the lesser-known history of enslaved African Americans forced to accompany Native American tribes on the Trail of Tears. From my first reading I was impressed with the carefully researched historical detail in this novel and how deftly it is combined with vivid characterization and propulsive storytelling. *Citizens Creek* focuses on two actual historical characters, Cow Tom, a famed linguist born into slavery in Alabama, and his granddaughter, Rose Simmons. The novel magnifies unheard voices, tells untold stories as it carries readers through years of volatile history. Every adventure, every crossroads, every complication reveals complex layers of identity and prejudice, hardship and perseverance, tenacity and strength. Those readers familiar with Oklahoma's tribal Freedmen will see the historical underpinning of today's controversies as the characters endure complications imposed on their status and their lives in the aftermath of the Civil War. Those readers who are unfamiliar with this part of our history will come to understand an important piece of our American story.

The Roads of My Relations

by Devon A. Mihesuah (Choctaw)

This collection of stories is a transgenerational saga told in multiple voices. These stories chronicle the lives of a close-knit Choctaw family from the time before they are forced from their Mississippi homelands into Indian Territory, through many generations in southeastern Oklahoma, and on into the twenty-first century. I was immediately intrigued when I first came upon these wonderful stories, many of which are set near Red Oak, my family's hometown going back several generations. The voices in the stories, at once familiar to me and uniquely Mihesuah's own, remind me of a powerful history. This is a place I've often written about, a place I've lived in, and on, and yet have never known in this deep way. Grounded in stories handed down in Mihesuah's own family, these engaging tales transgress western expectations of narrative. Here, the family holds their ties to the land despite every force seeking to wrest it from them.

American Ending

by Mary Kay Zuravleff

This historical novel is set among Russian immigrants in the coal mining country of eastern Pennsylvania. The only book in the series not set in Oklahoma, it is written by an Oklahoma author: Mary Kay Zuravleff grew up in Oklahoma City and has deep ties to the state. This delightful and riveting novel, told in the voice of a young girl who is the first in her family to be born in America, rounds out the theme by asking in direct and nuanced terms: who gets to be an American? The author mines her own family's history to tell a powerful story of a first-generation child growing up torn between the cultural constraints of the Old Country and freedom's pull in the New. In this novel, the Old World constraints surrounding young Yelena are a community of Russian Old Believers, a specific culture and religious sect. Yet every hardship the characters encounter, every push they make to become more thoroughly American, and every setback they endure in that effort, can be translated to today. It's a quintessentially American tale: immigrant communities striving to hold to the traditions, language, and faith of the culture they come from even as they embrace what it means to be American. The novel contrasts powerfully with another important American story, one that has manifested so acutely in Oklahoma: Indigenous peoples locked in a relentless struggle against their traditions, language, and faith being stripped away by the forces of America.





Look for the Union Label

Self-Fashioning a Working-Class Identity

BY TRACY FLOREANI AND
MARY CELESTE "MC" FLOREANI

Remember somewhere our union's sewing, our wages going to feed the kids, and run the house.

What's in your closet that you don't wear, but can't bear to let go of? A military uniform? A wedding dress? A letter jacket? Whether they are uniforms worn day in and day out on the shop floor, sashes and costumes for public demonstrations, or a vintage dress made by a skilled grandmother's hands, garments carry symbolism of personal history and identity. Clothing items hold a particular intimacy, too, as "ghost forms" of the loved ones who wore them, their second skin in the workplace or on the streets. They can be folded down and stored away, available at any time to be pulled from the closet to serve as sentimental reminders and proof of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. Clothing carries particular weight in the history of the working class, both as an industry that employed immigrants and as emblems of social movements and union membership.

Striking garment workers wear matching sashes and ribbons on May Day, ca. 1915-1920. George Grantham Bain Collection. Library of Congress.

Our own family houses a handmade suit three sizes too small for anyone still living, with a label sewn inside the lapel that seemingly proves exactly where and whom we come from—Teresina Masoni and Elio Floreani—whose hands and labor made our current lives possible. Through language barriers, housing limitations, workplace challenges, and the Second World War, the ladder our first-generation relatives gradually climbed to the American middle class was constructed of thousands of yards of thread worked by permanently-calloused fingers. As descendants of immigrant garment workers, to us the images of people bent over sewing machines in a sweatshop aren't distant black-and-white photographs, but part of a living, family history. Teresina and Elio arrived from Italy in the 1930s and worked in the garment industry in Chicago alongside their sisters before eventually owning their own tailor shop in Omaha, Nebraska.

An understanding and acknowledgment of a family's labor history is a shared experience for many from immigrant families or those raised in a tradition of working-class multiculturalism. Our family gatherings often turn to nostalgic conversations or prideful remembrances from the challenging, long careers of the first generation.



Americo (Elio) Floreani, photograph from immigration papers. Courtesy of the Floreani family.



Teresina Masoni Floreani, photograph from immigration papers, ca. 1936. Courtesy of the Floreani family.

Early twentieth-century immigrant garment workers like those in our family worked tirelessly to feed and clothe their own families—in the process clothing all of America. The conditions they endured and the material artifacts they made are now well documented in historical, photographic, and literary works. Many published stories

Women sewing in a garment factory. International Ladies Garment Workers Union Photographs (1885-1985). Kheel Center, Cornell University. flickr.com





Jennie Rizzandi helping her mother and father finish garments in a dilapidated tenement in New York City. They all work until 9 P.M. when busy, and make about \$2 to \$2.50 a week. January 1913. Photograph by Lewis Wickes Hines. National Child Labor Committee Collection. Library of Congress.

detail the oppressive and physically difficult nature of textile work: the thirteen-hour shifts in dimly-lit, crowded factories or work rooms; the contradictory indignity of making clothes they could not afford; the mandatory bag checks to ensure no scraps had been filched; the laundry they often took in to supplement meager wages; and the “piecework” they brought home to meet quotas or earn extra income. Families often huddled at tenement tables after dinner and sewed late into the night to try and make ends meet.

Kevin Baker brought this experience to life in his historical novel *Dreamland*. The protagonist Esse returns home to find her mother in a scene that makes readers feel the pain and sacrifice of piecework: “her mother hunched over what looked like a little pile of thorns.” The small wire and cloth floral embellishments she made left her fingers “pricked and swollen,” but her mother’s arthritis left her unable to do the more lucrative piecework. “Before that she had worked parting thread of silks to make tassels and before that, of course, they had been able to almost make a living together, sewing the secret garters.” The “of course” in this sentence implies the garment labor cycle many immigrants faced. Decent wages were available to some workers initially, but the labor affected their physical bodies in such a way that the trajectory—in terms of health, economics, and personal morale—often ultimately moved downward. Textiles were the literal bootstraps by which so many immigrants attempted to pull themselves up in the supposedly classless America. Sometimes, however, those straps unraveled.



This International Ladies Garment Workers Union broadside in Yiddish, English, and Italian underscores the multicultural nature of the garment industry. May 3, 1916. National Museum of American History. americanhistory.si.edu



This kind of extra work seldom resulted in escaping poverty and certainly isolated individuals, making it difficult to collaborate with peers on improving their labor conditions. Early twentieth-century Jewish writer Anzia Yeziarska's stories are full of such characters, women immigrants like her and her peers who struggled to find a place (culturally speaking) or an economic leg-up in the United States. In her autobiographical sketch "Soap and Water," Yeziarska describes being discriminated against by college administrators for not having perfectly pressed clothing and well-manicured fingernails. She was labeled "dirty" and had her diploma withheld because of it. "I had come a refugee from the Russian pogroms, aflame with dreams of America," she wrote. "I did not find America in the sweatshops, much less in the schools and colleges."

Her writing typically included detailed descriptions of clothing, leaning into its symbolic role for crafting a self-presentation from the materials at hand. Yeziarska also passionately and insistently reminded her readers that democracy was intended for all, yet the working poor who made and washed clothes for others were often denied access to the democratic promise. They were viewed instead by those in power as ancillaries to the machines of their labor more than as fully realized humans.

Many immigrants of that period were already quite active in the trade union movement, while others were unaware of it due to language barriers and the isolation of their work, or avoided the risk because their resident status was vulnerable. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) members led the struggle in the textile industry. Today the ILGWU is remembered by many for their iconic, musical "Look For the Union

Label" commercials aired throughout the 1970s and '80s. The commercials were aired in an attempt to encourage American consumers and members of other unions to purchase union-made apparel produced in the U.S. as the offshoring of textile manufacturing bled membership and drained power from the ILGWU, now known as Workers United International Union after the decline of the American textile industry forced mergers with other garment- and laundry-related unions. The memorable lyrics and staging left a lasting impression on viewers, enshrining the garment worker as integral to the American fabric:

Look for the union label
when you are buying a coat, dress or blouse.

Remember somewhere our union's sewing,
our wages going to feed the kids, and run the house.

We work hard, but who's complaining?
Thanks to the I.L.G. we're paying our way!

So always look for the union label,
it says we're able to make it in the U.S.A.!

In a bittersweet turn "Look for the Union Label" remains a lasting legacy of the ILGWU, for many the only interaction or engagement they've had with the textile unions or their history. The lyrics and visuals of the commercial continue to be celebrated and parodied to this day, a reminder of a painful period in the union's history marked by membership decline and a struggle to maintain density in a rapidly changing industry. While the lyrics speak to the political and social identity developed by the unions' membership over the better part of a century, the history of that development and impact the union made on the industry at the height of its power is left on the cutting room floor.

Union label from ILGWU parade float, December 7, 1960. International Ladies Garment Workers Union Photographs (1885-1985). Kheel Center, Cornell University. flickr.com



GARMENT WORKERS HAVE A LONG HISTORY OF STRIKING TO MAKE THEIR VOICES HEARD.

CLOCKWISE: Women strikers from Ladies Tailors Union during the "Uprising of the 20,000," February 1910. George Grantham Bain Collection. Library of Congress; Picketers outside Kolodney and Myers Employment Office wearing striped prisoner's uniforms call for higher wages and urge workers to join the ILGWU, ca. 1940s. International Ladies Garment Workers Union Photographs (1885-1985) Kheel Center, Cornell University. flickr.com; Striking dressmakers, ca. 1955. International Ladies Garment Workers Union Photographs (1885-1985). Kheel Center, Cornell University. flickr.com; Members of ILGWU Local 142 picket in the garment center district for union-made shoulder pads, 1930. International Ladies Garment Workers Union Photographs (1885-1985). Kheel Center, Cornell University. jstor.org





While strikes and direct action take center stage in the public's perception of unions, the foundational work of community and relationship building persists. LEFT: Striking clothing workers demand union rights, ca. 1910. From the online exhibit: "Union-Made: Fashioning America in the Twentieth Century." International Ladies Garment Workers Union Photographs (1885-1985). Kheel Center, Cornell University. library.cornell.edu/union-made/catalog/10-970, viewed August 13, 2024. RIGHT: Starbucks workers rally and march, April 23, 2002. Elliot Stoller. flickr.com

Following the establishment of the ILGWU in 1900, the following decade was marked by several incidents in the garment industry in New York City, setting off a chain of organizing and protest across multiple employers. Perhaps most well remembered is the infamous 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and subsequent death of 146 workers, mainly young immigrant women, at a non-union garment factory that brought increased attention to the exploitation of garment workers and galvanized many. However, by 1911, the ILGWU membership had already conducted mass strikes and labor actions in the city throughout the decade, notably "The Uprising of the 20,000," an eleven-week strike beginning in November 1909 led predominantly by young immigrant women membership. It was the largest strike conducted by women in American history at the time. The following year, the 1910 Cloakmakers Strike saw approximately 60,000 cloakmakers walk off the job.

In spite of the risks associated, strikes and collective labor actions among garment workers began to occur with greater frequency. By 1912, the ILGWU membership had swelled to nearly 100,000. While previous generations of our family toiled to build a foundation of wealth and prosperity for their children and grandchildren, collective

labor movements struggled to establish a foundation of rights from which all future workers could continue to build stronger unions and more stable livelihoods. When we clock into work today, we benefit from the cumulative struggle of hundreds of thousands of workers who held the line and fought for employment standards we now take for granted.

Historian Daniel Katz studied the early membership practices and multiracial community development in the ILGWU in particular and its evolution towards social unionism included broader social justice and democratic outcomes beyond collective bargaining agreements, while simultaneously engaging in coalition building and community development outside the shop floor. He concluded that the "role of social unionism as a strategy and as a set of principles rooted in radical ideology" was "propagated by strong women." Early membership of the ILGWU asserted and built their political identities as garment workers and union members from diverse ethnic communities, self-fashioning a new political identity for themselves and other American workers: multicultural. Their union grew to encompass not just the struggle to build power in the workplace, but also the joys of solidarity and social community across demographics.

Garment workers used their special skill set not only to craft identities, but to fashion clothing, banners, and more for their own sociopolitical purposes. Workers from other industries did, as well. Early usage of textiles in social and political demonstrations was often quite literal, focused on graphic banners and sashes featuring political slogans, party affiliations, titles, and organizations. Lightweight and easy to produce, they were a perfect platform.

As the twentieth century progressed, American workers began to produce more unique apparel, textiles, and accessories for use in social clubs, sports leagues, auxiliary associations, and perhaps most famously in picketing and other political demonstrations. As early as 1910, the ILGWU urged their ranks to wear pins and buttons to show that they were “loyal members.” What followed was over a century of creative, boundary-pushing applications of costumes and graphic apparel on picket lines and in the union’s social halls.

Increased access to a wider variety of raw materials and crafting supplies allowed workers to continue to innovate and create unique and exciting vehicles for asserting their identity as union members or for use in public demonstrations. Simultaneously, as custom graphic apparel became more common in American organizational culture, unions began to invest directly in garments and accessories as gifts and development tools. Buttons. Pens. Keychains. Hats. Bandanas. Gloves. Watches. Clothing. Today, these items are lovingly known as “Union Swag,” while a union member with particularly strong style and lots of swag is deemed as having “Union Drip.”

Contemporary union swag, like its historic counterparts in the forms of graphic political textiles, cultural costumes, and handmade garments, offers the opportunity to create or “self-fashion” an identity and project a social stance. This self-fashioning takes place in spite of—or often in resistance to—existing power structures and serves as an opportunity to publicly claim the class of “worker” and all of its implied political identity. A strategically placed piece of swag as small as a dime-sized lapel pin worn at work carries with it the echoes of thousands of marching, chanting workers.

As with trading cards and Halloween candy, not all union swag is created equal. Buttons and stickers, ubiquitous and suitable for trades and swaps, are the Necco wafers and Tootsie Rolls in this hierarchy. Outerwear, given the complexity of the patterns and fabric, requires more labor and cost to produce, making its trade value more akin to the full-size Snickers bar. Their scarcity makes them valuable, and the iconic glossy, satin Teamsters bomber jacket is one of the most sought-after articles of union apparel by members and non-members alike.



Collection of union pins.
Rebecca Roberts. etsy.com

Still, one garment is the preferred choice for unions and their members: the humble t-shirt. Their versatility, unisex fit, relative affordability, and familiarity in the American wardrobe has led to their rise to the top of the hierarchy, and they are the most frequently given and proudly worn. The solidarity and struggles of union membership elevate these ordinary items into something more.

Just like family heirlooms and other textile artifacts, though, union swag is complex and fraught with contradictions and projections. A union t-shirt may be printed by a unionized screenprint shop here in the U.S., but may also unwittingly play into labor exploitation because of current supply-chain politics and working conditions for garment workers making those cotton shirts for a U.S. corporation's off-shore contractor. A t-shirt, hat, or button is only declarative of political ideology, a reference to sentiment rather than sentiment acted upon, able to be worn by anyone regardless of how they understand their role in a political movement or how others perceive it.

Likewise, as the descendants of garment workers, we must grapple with the contradictions of our own lives as white-collar workers detached from the experiences of physical toil that defined our grandparents' lives in America. As an educator and organizer, respectively, we attempt to honor our predecessors in our choice of work, while our daily lives still grow increasingly distant from their struggles.

Contradiction, however, is inherent to the histories and practices of working class social movements, education, and the immigrant experience. While we ourselves work further from the factory floor with each passing

generation, our family's labor history remains a present reminder of the debt we owe to others and how imperfectly we struggle to pay them back. We can't entirely control how our self-fashioned identities are manufactured or perceived, but we can continue to assert them and build on the labor of the past through our ongoing demands for economic justice for all.

Whether a t-shirt worn on the picket line or the pristinely kept uniform of a beloved family member, garments alone are imperfect tools for affirming social identity and political ideology, yet we return to them time and time again to ground ourselves and project our chosen likeness onto others or ourselves. In spite of their limitations, textiles physically connect our abstract identity to the present. Whether to craft our own identity or linger in the memory of

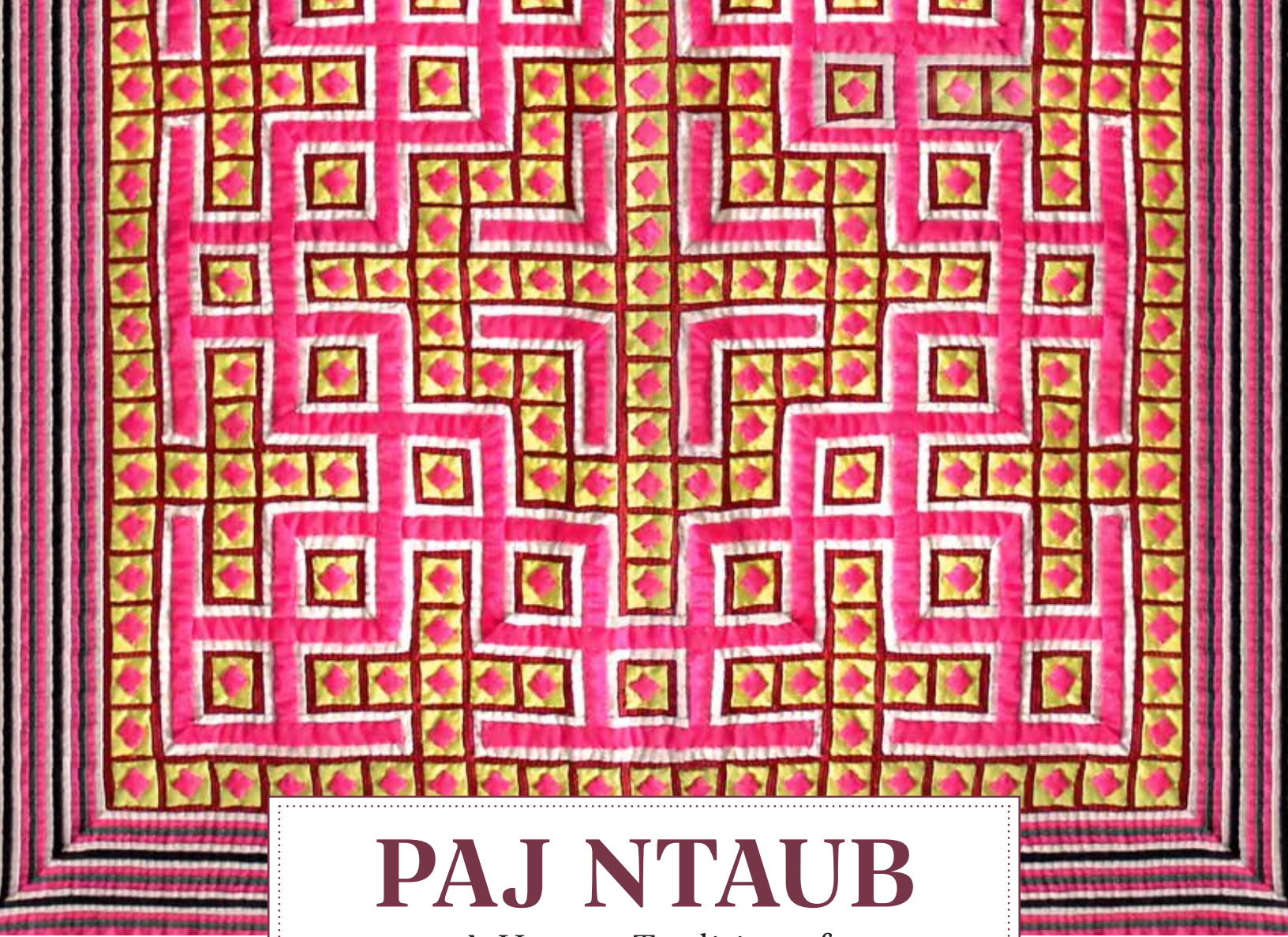
those who are no longer here to share their solidarity and experiences with us, the sensory familiarity and creative potential of fabric remains potent.

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MARY CELESTE "MC" FLOREANI is a Lead Organizer with Workers United International Union and a National Coordinator on the Starbucks Workers United Campaign, where she travels across the Midwest teaching Starbucks workers about their rights to organize and the rich history of their union and garment worker struggles. While traveling, she frequents second-hand shops in search of labor history artifacts.



ILGWU Sewing Kit. Courtesy MC Floreani.



PAJ NTAUB

A Hmong Tradition of Sewing and Survival

BY PAMELA CHEW

In August, 1981, I answered an employment advertisement that changed my life. Catholic Charities of Eastern Oklahoma was hiring instructors to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to the incoming refugees of Southeast Asia, including the Laotian Hmong. Although I'd never been paid to teach ESL, I was a language learner and a graduate in French and Italian. I understood what it was like to learn a new language and was extremely excited to meet and help my students. For the next eight years, we taught each other as I learned the rich history of this ethnic minority. Historically an oral culture, they shared and sustained knowledge, beliefs, customs, and identity not only through stories, but the stitches of their textile tradition: *paj ntaub*.

Intricate *paj ntaub*. Bobbie Chew Bigby. Collection of Pamela Chew



Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand, ca. 1980.
Ken and Visakha Kawasaki. wikimedia.com

Originally from China, the Hmong have maintained a unique and distinct culture for millennia. Independent and self-sufficient, they lived in small villages and successfully farmed for centuries before some moved to the mountains of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar in the nineteenth century to escape persecution and imperialism. It was not the last time conflict forced them from home.

In the 1960s, the United States began recruiting Laotian Hmong as political tensions rose in the region. When communist forces gained control of Laos in 1975, they targeted the Hmong who had helped the Americans. Facing retaliation and possible death, the Hmong fled to refugee camps in Thailand. This dangerous escape usually meant crossing the powerful Mekong River with all family members including children and elderly tied together at the waist or dangerously floating in innertubes across the cold, dark water. Many could not swim and there was also the danger of being spotted by the forces who patrolled the riverbanks. It seemed miraculous to survive this journey.

Yet my students and many others had survived and by the early 1980s, around sixty Hmong families had settled in Tulsa with cities in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California welcoming thousands more. Having spent their lives as farmers, many of the new arrivals had never attended formal classes. They were not illiterate, but preliterate, since their current written language was new, only Romanized thirty years earlier. Resultantly, I needed to incorporate other language learning techniques, such as Total Physical Response (TPR), which combines physical movement demonstrations with language. I also needed to create a learning environment that was welcoming and not overwhelming.

We started with a night class, but as more students arrived, we added daytime classes as well. Class sizes were small, around ten to twelve students, and within a month, we developed a close trust and bond and felt relaxed as a group. A nursery was provided on-site during the day and the women and I began to share a common medium that served as a bridge between us—sewing.

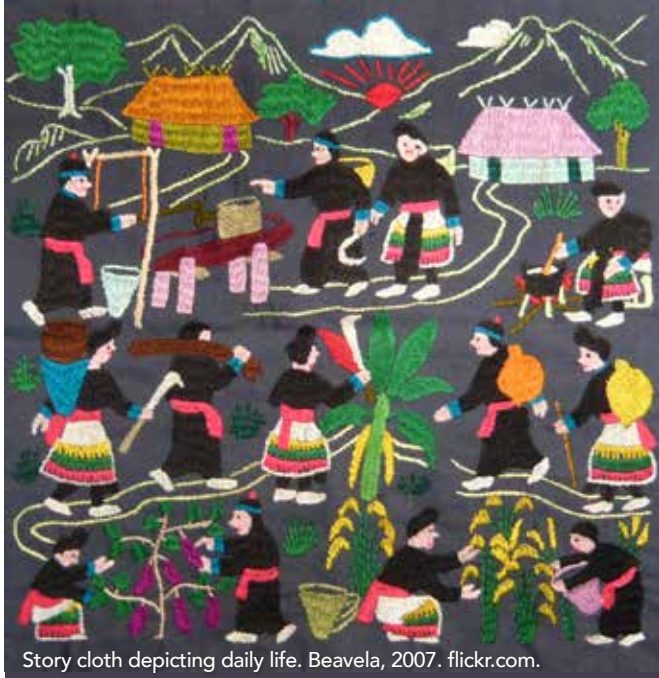
As a high school student, I had been lucky to learn sewing and knitting in a required home economics class. I was comfortable making my own clothing and could enjoy and appreciate the artistry and work behind the small hair ribbons some women sewed during class.

Language learning could now focus on a familiar skill for my female students. As they began communicating more, I learned about their cultural traditions, including one of the most enduring—*paj ntaub*, the hand-stitched, colorful “flower cloth” that was central to Hmong culture.

Paj ntaub [pahn-dow] from *paj* meaning “flower” and *ntaub* meaning “cloth,” includes batik, appliqué, reverse-appliqué, and embroidery. It is also known by its Americanized phonetic spelling, *pa ndau*. Considered both a utilitarian and artistic skill for Hmong women, girls began learning around age five and had typically mastered it by adolescence. Before the 1970s, *paj ntaub* needlework consisted of intricate designs and patterns that were applied to blouses, skirts, sashes, baby carriers, hats, and more. It often included motifs emphasizing nature. Snail, elephant’s foot, star, heart, chicken feet, sun,



Detail from Hmong bag. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.



Story cloth depicting daily life. Beavela, 2007. flickr.com.

Paj ntaub is the language of our ancestors, each stitch telling the story of our heritage, resilience, and identity. It symbolizes the beauty of our culture and the strength of our community, passed down from generation to generation.

- Katelyn Lor,
Hmong American Association
of Oklahoma, Inc.

leaf frond, mountains, seeds, centipede, dragon's tail, and ram's horns or head are some of the most common. Other essential elements included geometric designs, embellishments, overlay, and borders. Interpretations of *paj ntaub* symbols combined with clothing styles and colors helped distinguish Hmong subgroups.

In the mid-late 1970s, another form of *paj ntaub* evolved—the story cloth. Life in the refugee camps of Thailand provided extended periods of free time for Hmong families and they were encouraged by the aid workers to tell their cultural and personal stories with needle and thread. These story cloths proved popular with tourists and generated a small amount of income for the refugees. In a departure from earlier *paj ntaub*, grandfathers, fathers, and sons took part in the creation of story cloths. These textiles not only preserved history, but also exhibited self-identification, self-recognition, and adaptation. They validated the Hmong existence and experience and complemented the oral storytelling traditions by providing visual details of legends, tales, customs, and daily life.

Throughout history, humans have recorded their experiences of routine daily life, celebrations, fears of and attacks by enemies, as well as the natural beauty of the environment including flora, fauna, and wildlife. Hmong story cloths often recorded in minute and colorful details the painful and peaceful moments of life. They illustrated



Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand, ca. 1980.
Ken and Visakha Kawasaki. wikimedia.com



Woman sewing *paj ntaub* in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in Thailand, ca. 1980. Ken and Visakha Kawasaki. [wikimedia.com](https://www.wikimedia.com)



Paj ntaub incorporating Elephant Foot [detail]. Bobbie Chew Bigby. Collection of Pamela Chew.

attempted escapes after the war and life in the camps, but also the fulfillment of an agrarian life and hunting scenes that featured wildlife such as wild boar, foxes, tigers, snakes, and monkeys. It was life as it once was with some scenes providing hope of what it could be again. These story cloths were memories as well as maps. Today, the Library of Congress includes several in its collection within the Geography and Map Division.

Reading *paj ntaub*, particularly the story cloth, requires a well-rounded knowledge of Hmong lifestyle, environment, traditions, and folklore. An understanding of history and conflict in Southeast Asia is also crucial. These cloths are equal to artistic snapshots. Every sewn detail is critical for the story and has been carefully chosen and positioned.



When a culture is uprooted and forced to relocate due to war, natural disasters, or disease, changes are inevitable. Often, these moves from a once appreciated and treasured way of life and familial legacy are permanent. For the Hmong, adaptation was crucial for a family's future in the United States. I witnessed in Tulsa the valiant efforts of many Hmong families with three or more generations working together to succeed in a new environment. Learning a new language or perhaps

for the elders, a first chance to write and read was challenging. Beginning or continuing an education, finding employment, or adjusting to an unfamiliar diet and cuisine, left and leaves little or no leisure time. There was less emphasis on traditional arts and customs as families adapted. The important elements of artistic skills and storytelling could have been left behind, but they weren't.

Paj ntaub played a critical role during their first years in Tulsa. It helped introduce the Hmong to their new Oklahoma neighbors and provided revenue. By late May, 1983, around 800 Hmong lived in Tulsa and some exhibited and sold their needlework through the Green Country Quilters' Guild and Midwest Professional Artists Show. Sewing was something everyone, regardless of background, understood and recognized.

In the following decades, *paj ntaub* continued to bring people together. At Tulsa Junior College's International Festivals of the 1990s and later at Tulsa Community College's Festivals of the 2000s, Hmong women and girls modeled handcrafted *paj ntaub* clothing. Representatives from Tulsa's Green Country Quilters' Guild were invited to attend the celebrations and famed fashion show in which experts in stitchery could share ideas. Story cloths were also on display to be studied in-depth. It was a wonderful



Story cloth showing migration [detail].
Bobbie Chew Bigby. Collection of Pamela Chew.



Hmong women at market in Sa Pa, Vietnam,
2004. Brian Snelson. flickr.com.

joining together of two cultures through the shared and similar tradition of sewing.

The Hmong New Year celebration is still the one cherished days-long festival at which *paj ntaub* and story cloths can be found in vendors' booths at both Oklahoma and Arkansas venues. The new selections could very well be imported from Thailand and be partially machine-sewn rather than be the totally, handmade pieces of traditional mothers and great-grandmothers. Fashion costume pieces are also available for purchase at the booths.

Still, there are efforts in the Hmong community to pass on needlework skills to the younger generation. Many of the young Hmong are now third-generation Americans and find themselves linking the natural and oral wisdom of their elders to the breakneck speed of technologically coded workdays.

Continuity amidst change characterizes the Hmong experience. They have farmed for thousands of years and today still are. Farming continues to be a way of life and in many Oklahoma communities including Tulsa, the Hmong farmers are famed, respected, and sought after for their expertly grown and harvested produce. Tulsa Farmers' Market executive director, Kristin Hutto said it best: "Our Hmong growers are truly the backbone of market farming in Green Country."

Paj ntaub survives too, despite centuries of moving and trying to find a place of permanence and safety, a place to do what they know best and to exist undisturbed in nature. *Paj ntaub* has been a constant and symbolizes resilience, adaptation, strength, beauty, and ethnic identity.

As the daughter of two painters, an appreciation for these artistic creations is in my blood. I collect, protect, and preserve *paj ntaub*—the stories of a remarkable culture of survivors that I knew as if we were family. Telling a story orally or visually helps future generations understand the lives of their elders. Although many of the original artists are gone, *paj ntaub* serves as a reminder for all Hmong of their history's people and places.

PAMELA CHEW retired from Tulsa Community College where she was the founding faculty member of the Italian and ESL Programs. She also taught at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji, and in Honduras and Colombia.

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "Inspiration," *Craft in America*, December 16, 2022. PBS. Minnesota Hmong community members discuss the importance of *paj ntaub* and efforts to keep the tradition alive. bit.ly/4d6YGEX
- Celebrate the Hmong New Year with culture, clothing, and food on October 26 and 27 in Inola, Oklahoma. Hosted by the Hmong American Association of Oklahoma, Inc. facebook.com



WOOL AND WAR

An American Take on a Global Story

BY MADELYN SHAW & TRISH FITZSIMONS



The poster exhorted the American public to patriotic action. It was 1917 and the United States had just entered the First World War, joining Great Britain and its allies against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and theirs. But this poster did not promote recruitment or victory gardens. Instead, it urged citizens to “Join a Sheep Club.” The thread between pastoral fields and battlefields? The preeminent fiber for cold weather clothing, military uniforms, and blankets until the late twentieth century: wool. The army

needed “Twenty sheep to equip and clothe each soldier.” In war, wool was as essential to success as steel and gunpowder.

Even though most European nations produced some, as did the U.S., it was rarely enough to meet local civilian needs plus support any manufacturing for export. It certainly was not enough to handle the demand generated by the newly industrialized, cold-climate warfare that characterized conflicts from the American Civil War through the Korean War.

Shepherdesses drive their flock down Michigan Avenue in Chicago, Illinois, to stimulate interest in stocking lawns and farms with lambs and sheep to increase the wool supply, ca. 1917. International Film Service. American Unofficial Collection of World War I Photographs. National Archives and Records Administration.

As a result, the demand for wool in wartime existed in a vortex of negotiation, intrigue, and anxiety. All combatant nations tried to ensure continuing supplies of this vital resource, but none so successfully as Great Britain. Its colonies of Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa already supplied most of the wool needed for its enormous textile manufacturing industry. In the preceding century, their wool production had grown exponentially. In 1805 Australia had around 20,000 sheep. By 1913, they had more than 85 million. Britain's control of its empire's wool would keep this strategic commodity out of its enemies' hands, clothe its own soldiers and civilians, and ensure its woolen industry had an edge in post-war trade.

When war erupted in 1914, both Germany and Britain had large wool stockpiles, more than enough, they thought, for a war expected to last only a few months. Even so, Britain blockaded German ports almost immediately after declaring war, proclaiming goods that might support their enemy's war effort to be contraband. By March 1915 that included all woolen products and raw wools. Concerned that the neutral United States, with its sizable population of German descent including woolen manufacturers centered in Passaic, New Jersey, might send supplies to Germany, Britain also imposed an embargo in late 1914

on shipments of British and British Dominion wool to the United States.

American manufacturers, worried about how to secure enough raw wool to satisfy their civilian customers, and to meet increasing demand to fill military contracts from abroad, organized The Textile Alliance in 1915. In return for limited licenses to import British-controlled wool, this organization ensured that buyers would not trans-ship wool or products made from it to Britain's enemies.

The five-month Battle of the Somme, in 1916, reinforced the importance of the wartime wool supply when it claimed 420,000 British, 200,000 French, and 450,000 German casualties, a shocking wastage of men and their equipment. In October the British government

compulsorily purchased all wools from Australia and New Zealand, a practice renewed through 1919. Similar arrangements, differing in detail, were also made with British India. British South Africa was allowed an open market, but in practice sold mostly to Britain and its European allies rather than neutrals. The South American nations of Argentina and Uruguay, the remaining open market, tried hard to fill the gap. Britain's control of the seas ensured that her enemies and often neutrals could not expect to source wool there, either.

Effectively cut off from overseas wool by the British blockade, Germany and Austria-Hungary were gripped by a dire need after they depleted their pre-War stockpile. Their armies systematically stripped occupied regions in France, Belgium, and the Balkans of wool and most other textile fibers. This included supplies held in textile mills, but also stocks from farms, the stuffing from mattresses, and even blankets and clothing from civilians. Confiscated materials were shipped to Germany to be processed into yarn or redistributed. From early 1916, much of their civilian and military equipment such as feed sacks, wagon covers, and various tool and weapon covers were made of twisted paper yarns. Civilians continued to wear this paper clothing, a form of *ersatz* (German for substitute), for several years after the war.

Buying wool wasn't the only problem. Supply lines were long and hazardous with attendant high costs and competition for cargo space. Freight charges on wool in 1918 were more than four times what they would be in 1921-26. Shipping wool from, say, Australia to Massachusetts involved more than 10,000 miles of open ocean, fraught with not only the normal natural dangers but with surface and submarine warships. All of the nations that had to do without wool during the war retained long memories of that deprivation.

The U.S. was among them. American growers had never raised enough wool to meet even the domestic requirements of the nation's textile manufacturers in



"Join a Sheep Club" propaganda poster, 1917-1918. Philadelphia: Breuker & Kessler. United States Department of Agriculture. World War I Posters. Library of Congress.



Sheep on the White House lawn, ca. 1919. Harris & Ewing, photographer. Prints and Photographs Division. Library of Congress.

peacetime. In the 1910s, the U.S. only had about 50 million sheep, inclusive of both wool and meat breeds, which was nowhere near enough for wartime needs. Even after entering the war in April 1917, the U.S. cobbled together wool supplies from its own resources, the open markets of South Africa, Argentina, and Uruguay, the limited stocks of British-controlled wools allowed, and by investigating places it had never purchased from before, such as China. This was doubly important as for the first time the American woolen industry was also manufacturing textiles for export, primarily on military contracts from Britain and allied nations.

The U.S. also mixed wool with other fibers to extend supplies. With cotton at a premium during the war, other fibers were tested to replace wool for civilian use, including ramie (a bast fiber also called China Grass), cat-tail fiber, which proved impractical, and a 'conservation yarn' of mixed mohair and silk. The most important, however, was shoddy: the textile industry term for recycled wool fiber. From its origins in Yorkshire, England, in the early 1800s, the shoddy industry had grown steadily, providing a cheap alternative to new wool. Used judiciously, mixing shoddy with new wool cut the cost of a textile without significantly impairing its quality.

But the American public, federal government, and Quartermaster Corps all feared replaying the Civil War's shoddy scandals, when northern textile manufacturers, trying to outfit a rapidly growing army, added so much shoddy to the yarn mix that the durability of uniforms and

blankets was compromised, thus making the term shoddy a synonym for deliberately poor quality. Even though for certain uses shoddy was perfectly acceptable, the Civil War aura of profiteering clung to it, and the military and the industry were sensitive to how its use might be perceived both by soldiers and civilians.

Still, shoddy was used, sometimes up to 35% of the fiber mix, primarily in blankets and overcoats, sometimes in uniform jackets and breeches. And shoddy was recycled from cast-off battlefield detritus: the U.S. Army's Salvage Service collected, repaired, and reissued uniforms and blankets, and sold any beyond repair to the shoddy mills of Yorkshire, recouping twenty cents a pound from the British for more than a million pounds of scrap wool. American journalist Isaac Marcossan described the work of the 4,000 women at the British government's Paris Ordnance Depot, handling huge piles of battlefield salvage, "eloquent, if odorous evidence of the life-and-death struggle in which they have figured." The workers sorted the mountains of garments into clothing reusable by new recruits after washing and mending, and rags and fragments only fit for conversion into shoddy. Shoddy would continue to be important in stretching the supply of new wool during World War II and the Korean War.

Since military contracts had first choice of the wool market, shortages primarily affected civilians, at least in the Allied nations. In most nations, combatants and neutrals alike, conserving wool was considered a patriotic



OKLAHOMANS JOIN THE WAR EFFORT

Newspapers give a glimpse of how the entire state mobilized on the local level to help.

RUMMAGE SALE

Don't forget the Red Cross Rummage Sale on Saturday...above all keep in mind that the proceeds of the sale will provide warm clothing for our soldiers in the trenches. They are not accustomed to the damp, cold winters in France and will need wool socks, sweaters, etc., and money must be obtained to buy the yarn for these garments.

Elk City News-Democrat (November 8, 1917)

BOYS' SHEEP CLUB MAKES GOOD SHOWING

In order to encourage the sheep industry in Oklahoma, the Boys' Clubs Department of the Extension Division of A. & M. College organized, more than a year ago, a Sheep Club...Wool is one of the greatest needs of the world just at this time.

The Daily Transcript (December 26, 1917)

KNITTERS WANTED

The Red Cross Society reports that they have now on hand plenty of yarn and wants knitters to knit for the soldiers. This is a patriotic duty the folks of the town and country owe the soldier boys in the trenches, and they will be sorely in need of wool sweaters and sox this coming winter.

The Vian Press (May 3, 1918)

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS ON INDIVIDUAL WAYS TO HELP WIN THE WAR

Our men "overthere" on land and sea, our soldiers and sailors training here at home and joining the army and navy as the months go by, need wool for clothing and for blankets to keep them warm and well. We who are at home, supporting the war by our money and our labors, must add to our duties the vital aid of saving every bit of wool possible. Wool is one of the great aids of Victory.

The Tulsa World (August 31, 1918)

AID IN CLOTH CONSERVATION

Now the attic has been declared a military asset and joins the pantry in extending the present store to its greatest possible usefulness...we are urged to use every garment until it wears out and then re-use the best parts of it. The woman who does this is doing a patriotic service for her country when she happily and intelligently makes every yard of goods go to its utter-most.

Woods County Enterprise (November 29, 1918)

"You Can Help," poster, 1918. Illustration by Wladyslaw Benda. American Red Cross. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

duty. In early 1918, journalist Frank G. Carpenter explained the great need to the American public:

The government has issued each man [soldier] one overcoat, two service uniforms, two olive-drab shirts, three suits of heavy underwear, six pairs of light weight and four pairs of heavy weight socks, two pairs of thick gloves, and four warm blankets. All of these must be the purest of wool...for every 1,000,000 men we send over the ocean we must have 20,000,000 full-grown sheep here at home or in some other part of the world, and this is in addition to the vast amount of wool we need to clothe our own people.

Civilians were encouraged to reduce their wool consumption by substituting other materials or to choose clothing that was slimmer, shorter, and plainer. Sheep clubs arose across the country, encouraging small farmers, urban, and suburban dwellers to stock sheep. From rural areas to big cities, even to the White House, where sheep grazed the lawn from 1918 to 1920, wool was on the minds of Americans.

From the beginning of American involvement in April 1917 through May 1918, the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps sourced approximately 131 million pairs of wool socks; 85 million undershirts; 22 million blankets; 22 million uniform breeches; 19 million uniform jackets; and 9 million overcoats. This for an army that by the end of the War was comprised of 'only' four million men, about half of whom served overseas. This did not even include supplies for the 800,000 men who served in the navy and marines who were overseen by the Navy's Cabinet department which had its own cloth standards and procurement system.

By the time of the Armistice in November 1918, somewhere between 65 and 70 million men had served in the combined armed forces of the nations at war, radically exceeding the scale of any previous conflagration and consuming an almost unimaginable amount of wool. At a ratio of 20 sheep to one soldier's outfit, the world's estimated 634 million sheep could only outfit approximately 32 million soldiers once a year (let alone civilians). This need for wool not only shaped strategies and logistics during and after the war, but also the clothing we wear today.

The privations resulting from British control of so much of the world's wool supply and dependence on foreign sources of textile fibers pushed many manufacturing nations to continue the search for substitutes for the wool that another war would again put out of reach. The throwaway culture of textiles that we now take for granted—in which synthetics are so prominent—is a direct result.

Wool's physical properties of flame resistance, durability, and warmth—even when wet—made it exceptionally difficult to imitate. Early focus was on the further development of rayon, a man-made alternative to natural fibers based on chemically reworking the cellulose from wood. The wool have-not nations of WWI (primarily Germany, Italy, Japan, and the U.S.) led the way. Originally a slick and shiny silk substitute, by 1928 staple fiber rayon—meaning short, spinnable fibers given a matte finish like cotton or wool—was introduced. World rayon production grew rapidly, from 33 million pounds in 1920 to 457 million pounds in 1930, to 1,818 million pounds in 1937.

In the 1930s Italy also produced 'Lanital,' a casein, or milk-protein-based fiber, but European nations did not use it during the war, finding that milk was far more important as food. DuPont launched Nylon, also originally an alternative to silk, in 1939 after a decade of research. It, too, was not a suitable substitute for wool, but during WWII DuPont chemists began developing a new chemical synthetic based on carbon petrochemicals, known as Fiber A. We know it today as acrylic, a major source of current pollution in oceans and elsewhere. The European Environment Agency estimates that "between 200,000-500,000 tons of microplastic fibers from synthetic



Photographs from the National Archives and Records Administration illustrate the cycle of military wool use during the war: Socks for the government at the Chipman Knitting Mills, Easton, Pennsylvania, August, 1918; Supply Room at the classification and replacement camp, Cour-Cheverny, Loir-et-Cher, France, January 18, 1919; Unloading clothes and shoes to be repaired, Quartermaster Corps, Salvage Depot, Saone-et-Loire, France, December 21, 1918; and Salvage Repair Room, Laundry Unit, Quartermaster Corps, Bazeilles, Vosges, France, April 17, 1919.

textiles enter the world's marine environment each year."

Textile history is intrinsically global and multidisciplinary, with economic, political, social, ethnic, industrial, and military dimensions. The First World War impacted not only the countries who fought, but also those who did not, and its effects are still visible if you know where to look. The decisive rise of fully synthetic fibers after World War II and the primacy of cotton as a force in American history have eclipsed wool's role in our national story. But evidence of wool's rise and demise is everywhere: in the clothes we wear, the upholstery of our cars, the supply chains invisibly moving materials, the ocean floors and currents, even in our vocabulary. We should remember that textiles are an essential strategic industry, and that counting sheep, historically, has shaped the world we live in today.

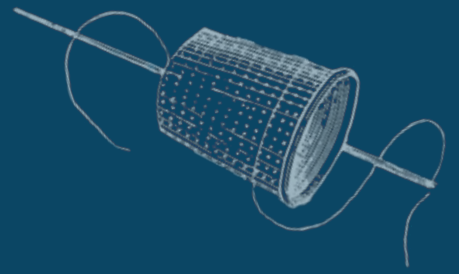
MADelyn SHAW is a curator and author specializing in the exploration of American culture and history and its international connections through textiles and dress.

TRISH FITZSIMONS is a documentary filmmaker, exhibition curator and social historian, and an adjunct professor at the Griffith Film School, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.

Since 2014 the two have collaborated on a creative research project exploring the relationships among the global wool trade, cold climate warfare, and the rise of synthetic fibers. They are grateful to Griffith University, Australian Wool Innovation, the Australian-American Fulbright Commission, the National Library of Australia, and the Queensland-Smithsonian Fellowship Program for their support. The authors' forthcoming book, *Fleeced: Unraveling the History of Wool in Wartime* (Rowman & Littlefield/Bloomsbury, 2025) explores this topic in greater depth and across continents and centuries. Publication details will be available on the Rowman & Littlefield/Bloomsbury website early in 2025.

Pieces of POETRY

POEMS BY TERRI LYNN CUMMINGS
AND VIVIAN FINLEY NIDA



THE FABRIC OF LIFE

By Terri Lynn Cummings

1.
The day after he went, his dad and I chose
a sweatshirt from the closet—child’s favorite
locomotive on cotton with weary threads.

It swathed the room with memories
bright as sparks from a coal-fired
engine on the train he loved to ride.

2.
We found him in a foreign room,
displayed on a table like merchandise
with artful light.

We slipped the shirt over his head,
arms through sleeves. Wiggled it down the back.
Smoothed the cloth over his chest, again and again.

This last rite performed by parents,
unqualified as clerics,
yet qualified as nature intended.

3.
Temporal cloth a drugstore discount—
woven chalice worth more than
a rail car heaped with gold,

held him, tender,
after we left
and the door closed.

4.
We carried home all last things.
Last kiss, last touch, last glance,
pajamas to hold against a cheek.

How long until his scent (that we breathe
into our blood) fades from fabric?
How long until the door opens for us?

TERRI LYNN CUMMINGS is Editor-in-Chief of *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*, a Woody Guthrie Poet, and a University of Oklahoma Mark Allen Everett Poet. She serves on the Literature Advisory Committee of Oklahoma City University and presents her work at symposiums and festivals. In addition, she co-hosts the monthly *Oklahoma Voices: Full Circle Bookstore Poetry Series* and open mic in Oklahoma City. She has studied at the Creative Writing Institute and holds a BS in Sociology/Anthropology from Oklahoma State University.

OKLAHOMA HERITAGE: THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT COTTON

By Vivian Finley Nida

I

April lilacs bloom
soft as Great-Grandma's
loose-fitting cotton dress
faded from washboard scrubbing

II

Bolls open and dry on plant
Cloud-like fibers bloom
Great-Grandma spins cotton yarn

III

Great-Grandma's knitting needles
fly all day to complete one of four
intricate squares for pillow sham

IV

Grandpa's horse carries him
back and forth from Indian Territory
to Clarksville Academy in Texas
His saddle blanket, heavy-weight twill
is part of the circuit

V

For Sister and me
Grandma sews flannel nightgowns
then turns scraps into soft kangaroos
Baby joeys peek from pouches

VI

Using finest thread for tatting
Grandma chooses pattern of rings and chains
trims collars for China dolls

VII

Seven decades and counting—
No children monkey around
jump on, fall off, or bonk heads
using youth bed's rolled cotton mattress

VIII

Browsing bolts of fabric, even with eyes closed
Mama's thumb and fingers know cotton varieties—
corduroy, crepe, denim, gauze, jersey, pique
seersucker, twill, velvet, voile

IX

After pillowcases dry on clothesline
Mama lets me use my toy iron
which does get warm, to press them

X

Sister's Sunbonnet Sue quilt, my fan quilt
read like catalogues of our closets
displayed on unbleached muslin squares
one bordered red, one blue, stitched by hand

XI

Wearing white starched shirt and tie
Daddy unveils 1957 Bel Air Chevrolet
I think he and Dinah Shore's
"See the USA in your Chevrolet"
will roll on forever, but her TV show ends
a month after heavy lid of casket
closes over his summer suit, ashen gray

XII

Harvest Moon is rising
Cotton fibers are spinning

XIII

Mama's baby dress
Grandma's tatted handkerchief
Great-Grandma's knitted bedspread and pillow shams
Artifacts for life

IT WAS ART

By Vivian Finley Nida

Your sewing

I felt like natural fabric

but you knew

I was man made

light weight

For that you chose simplicity

classic pattern for long wear

secured the design

gathering, tucking, easing, facing

I wish you were here now

to remove snaps

unravel mistakes

put right sides together

mend tears

as you once did

I would let you

needle, size, match, press

work love into art

VIVIAN FINLEY NIDA is a retired English and Creative writing teacher and holds a BA in English and an MS in Secondary Education from Oklahoma State University. Her book of poetry, *From Circus Town, USA*, was published by Village Books Press. Her work has appeared in *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine, *Conclave: The Trickster's Song*, *Oklahoma English Journal*, and other fine publications.



Wilma E. McDaniel.
Courtesy Roman Loranc,
Oklahoma State University
Library Collection.

THREADS

The Writing of Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel

BY KAREN NEUROHR

I have always been drawn to regional literature and reading about places I know. The familiar can offer a warm, satisfying feeling. For more than twenty years, I had acquainted myself with Oklahoma authors, yet Wilma remained unfamiliar to me until I read her obituary on April 22, 2007. The headline, “Stroud native wrote of Dust Bowl migrants” piqued my interest as did the large photograph of her pensively looking away and her accompanying poem, “Picking Grapes 1937.” I wondered how the “Okie Poet” of California’s Central Valley had eluded me for so long. “If you don’t know about Wilma McDaniel, you should,” Oklahoma journalist Ann DeFrangé eulogized. “She is part of your state’s cultural fabric. She represented you in her words to the rest of the world.”

Fortuitously, this sparked interest in Wilma not only coincided with the development of the oral history research program at the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Library where I am a

faculty member, but also with OSU Library Special Collections’ emphasis on Oklahoma women and on the Dust Bowl. If I couldn’t speak with Wilma or meet her, I could learn more by recording and preserving interviews with those who did.

Although I hadn’t heard of her until 2007, she was not unknown by people in central California or others in Oklahoma, particularly in Lincoln County. Wilma corresponded with several people and sent materials to be archived at the Stroud Library and the Lincoln County Museum of Pioneer History. Since 2007 I have been honored to record 34 interviews which are publicly accessible online (see EXTRA p.40).

Wilma, I have found, was part of our fabric, but she also wrote about it in figurative and physical forms—the fabric from which she was cut, Oklahoma and California; everyday moments that when stitched together depict a life; individuals that create community; and clothing that marked time, place, class, and cultures.

Wilma E. McDaniel. Courtesy
James R. Chlebda Archive.



Born December 22, 1918, near Stroud, Oklahoma, Wilma was the fourth of eight children and the first daughter born to Benjamin Fletcher McDaniel, a sharecropper, and Anna Finster.

My entire childhood and early adulthood were formed, forged in great rural poverty and hardship. My mother was a devoutly religious woman of heroic stature. I close my eyes and see her...taking down frozen laundry from a clothesline...The smell of lye soap assails in memory. I see Mama's hands so reddened and raw from the homemade soap. I learned firsthand how caustic it was. I took my turn at the washboard early.

Not uncommon for sharecropping, the McDaniels moved several times. The social fabric of Wilma's childhood was colored by school, tent revivals, creek-side picnics, and occasional movies. Her brother Roy recalled a schoolteacher telling their mother that Wilma was "way, way above average in learning compared

with other students." Family members marveled at her unique storytelling skills. In high school, "she outshone everybody" and "had an imagination that just was really contagious." Her mother's family "took great store in education," and Wilma was encouraged to write. At 14, she became a published poet when *The Depew Independent Newspaper* printed "Nature is Unfair," the first stanza hinting at fabric:

The sky is crying grey color
like the buttons in the bin
at Pettigrew's store

Three years later in 1936, the McDaniels left Oklahoma and migrated to the Central Valley of California. Wilma was a self-described "gangling girl madly in love with John Steinbeck and carrying lead pencils and lined paper as a torch for him" as they made their way west. The McDaniels' journey, however, was threaded differently from the fictitious Joad family of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Two older sons had already migrated and Wilma's mother had relatives in California. Instead of an old jalopy, Wilma's father traded his pickup truck for a used Pierce-Arrow automobile. The family picked crops along their journey and when they arrived, they had a place to stay and relatives who helped them find work. The Golden State would be Wilma's home for the next seventy years, but Oklahoma had made its mark:

I love my native state of Oklahoma. It took the first seventeen years of my life and molded them for better or worse. My character and attitude toward life was fairly well set by my last birthday in the state before starting the Dust Bowl exodus to California. I regard the experiences of those early years as my precious legacy.

In California, Wilma's life centered on family, faith, friends, and writing. She earned her GED and took a few college classes, but caring for her mother took precedence. Wilma never married, didn't drive, and always lived with her mother. Eschewing her mother's preferred

religious beliefs, Wilma converted to Catholicism in her 20s. Her faith was a cornerstone of her life, and she was buried in a “plain brown robe of a Franciscan monk.” Her own precarious health limited her ability to work, but she occasionally held different jobs: picking crops, caring for children or elderly relatives, and short stints in retail and in her brothers’ photography studio. Primarily, though, she wrote poetry and prose and pursued self-education through reading and attending artistic events while cultivating friends who appreciated her talent and encouraged her.

She later reflected: “By the time I was ten I was afflicted with poetry, not only affected, I was afflicted. It had me. I was in its grips and I remain there today.” For

years, Wilma kept her poetry private until one day she took a shoebox of her work to the local paper’s editor, Tom Hennison:

He gingerly raised up a poem, and read it, and he raised up a couple more, and the expression on his face changed some way. He published something almost every week. I have to give him credit for encouraging me at a time when there was very little encouragement for poets, most particularly spinster poets. You know, I was expected to write poems that rhyme, June with moon, and heart-rending verses of unrequited love. I don’t think he was expecting what he got.

Miss McDaniel stitched together pieces of different colored cloth for a pillow cover as she spoke, removing and replacing her eyeglasses. She asked the reporter which piece he wanted to be, then stitched in a plain, brown rectangle for him.

Tulare Advance Register
July 21, 1976

Wilma E. McDaniel. Courtesy
James R. Chlebda Archive.





In her lifetime, Wilma published fifty-one chapbooks of poetry and prose. Eight of those titles explicitly name something related to fabric: *A Homemade Dress* (1979), *Shoes Without Laces and Other Hard Luck Poems* (1979), *A New Leather Belt* (1980), *Man with a Star Quilt* (1995), *Shirtwaist Women* (1996), *Tatted Lace* (1997 and 2009), *Hoeing Cotton in High Heels* (1998), and *Borrowed Coats* (2001). Four titles have been published posthumously, most recently the excellent biography *Pick Up Your Name and Write* by Betty Blanks. Her writing is included in several literary anthologies, and her friend and publisher James Chlebda calculated that she published in approximately eighty different journals across the country.

Her work and correspondence are now held in multiple collections including: the University of California Merced Library, the Oklahoma State University Library, the Stroud Public Library, and the Lincoln County Museum of Pioneer History. In 2013, the Stroud Public Library was named a national literary landmark in honor of Wilma, as was the Tulare Historical Museum in California in 2022.

Disparate threads bind the fabric of her writing, including Dust Bowl migration, working-class roots, perspectives across a lifespan, life and death, identity and dreams, spirituality, and her deep, abiding love for Oklahoma as well as California. Touches of humor, self-deprecation, wonder, and undercurrents of grief exist. At its core, her work centered on community and family, what she called “the warp and wool of life.” Poetry, the self-described American Contemplative said, “can burn away trash and sear my ego, or warm my spirit in a bitter cold state of mind. I cannot imagine life without it.” Today, many cannot imagine theirs without her writing.

KAREN NEUROHR is a professor with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at the Oklahoma State University Library where she has been honored to conduct oral history interviews with family, friends, and publishers of Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel and facilitate a special collection at the OSU Library of Wilma’s publications, correspondence, recordings, and articles. In addition to oral history interviews, she is the departmental project lead for ListenOK, an outreach initiative for creating and maintaining a statewide inventory of oral history interviews in Oklahoma repositories.

EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- *Pick Up Your Name and Write: The Life of Wilma McDaniel*, Betty Blanks, 2024. A biography of the American Contemplative. amazon.com
- *Down an Old Road: The Poetic Life of Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel*, Chris Simon, 2001. A documentary that “paints a portrait” of Wilma. sagelandmedia.com
- Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Collection at the Oklahoma State University Library. Browse oral histories, essays, film clips, and more. bit.ly/3SzK9sW

The following poems are printed courtesy of the University of California, Merced Library. Literary copyright owned by the Regents of the University of California. The physical chapbooks, unless otherwise noted, can be found in the Oklahoma State Library’s Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Special Collection.

PICKING GRAPES 1937

Magic seventeen
and new in California

working in bursting
sweet vineyards

hot sand on soul
one strap held by a
safety pin

a girl could be whatever
she desired

the first breath of
Eve in Paradise

the last gasp of Jean Harlow
in Hollywood

Appeared in *A Primer for Buford*, Hanging Loose Press, Brooklyn, NY, 1990.

A PRINCE ALBERT WIND

He doesn’t come to me on
Sundays in his good suit
and black string tie, piously
carrying a Bible, never

But put me in a Saturday town
of khaki men with Southwest
faces and rich slow tongues

And Papa will blow around
the nearest corner
on a Prince Albert wind
carrying a little poke of candy
maybe jellybeans

He will spot me with no trouble
smile confidently and say
Sister, you wanna go eat a bowl
of chili at Poor Boys’ Café

I will get up from the bench
in front of J.C. Penney’s
and go meet him as I always do

Appeared in *A Prince Albert Wind*, Mother Road Publications, Albuquerque, NM, 1994.



East View of Cimarron River. April 19, 2010. George Thomas. flickr.com

AN OKLAHOMA LITANY

Top drawers of memory
 never contain
 any healing for me
 When wounded
 I always pull out
 the bottom drawer
 of my memory
 the one marked Oklahoma
 It holds a list of old towns
 with funny names and touching beauty
 which I recite with reverence
 Bowlegs
 Depew
 Pretty Water
 Idabel
 Lone Star
 Gypsy Corner
 Broken Arrow
 Cloud Chief
 until the words
 form a prayer
 which I do not understand
 but I close the drawer
 with my own Amen

“An Oklahoma Litany” recording,
Stroud Public Library, 1984.

A PAIR OF RIVERS

Everyone should have
 a lover
 and I had two of them
 now locked in memory

At nine
 it was the lazy Cimarron
 with orange water
 and huge catfish
 the color of mud

At seventeen
 I found an other
 in far-off California
 a tumbling crystal river
 with the holy name Merced

Appeared in *A River They Call Merced*,
Stone Woman Press, Hanford, CA, 1991.



The Merced River in Yosemite, California. Published 2020.
Tomas Martinez. unsplash.com

A GIRL WE KNEW ON PEACH STREET

She changed everyday
 Neva loved clothes
 better than men
 and was governed
 by the stars
 never wore a dress
 without consulting
 her horoscope
 Should I wear blue
 today
 for best results
 or yellow stripes on
 black
 in fancy shops
 her credit cards agreed
 with every purchase
 until the day
 she lost her job
 and lamented bitterly
 she should never
 have worn green
 on a day the stars
 favored violet
 and she is looking
 for another job

Appears in Calisphere, the University of California
online database.

COLOR CLAIMS OF 1936

Multi-tongues
sounded nearer
on the sandy road
to a shingle house
ethnic eyes
could find my door
even in the dark

As each month passed
I saw my old life fade
look less like me
and new clothes
did not spin themselves

I picked plums
for two long days
and bought myself a dress
right off the manikin
from a window at Mode-O-Day

Base vanity on my part
that faded in heavy rain
and ran down the gutters
in Ginger Rogers blue
and left me to wonder
if Sorrento red
would wash from lipstick
if I put it to the test
(my house, my dress in 1936)

Appeared in *Tatted Lace and Other Handmade Poems*, rev. 2nd ed. Edited by J.R.R. Chlebda, 2009.

CLOTHES DRYER

Monday used to be
the day after Sunday
it meant washday to most women
on Persimmon Road
but seance to Ardella Pitts
who always hung her dead husband up
with wooden pins
beside a yellow trousseau gown
and allowed the wind
to whip him with daffodil might
while she washed his shirts
and put away each week
until a man in overalls
who had no right
broke Ardella's contract with the
great beyond
by installing a dryer
Now we never see Mr. Pitts
and Ardella moans
that he doesn't love her any longer

Appeared in *California Heartland: Writing from the Great Central Valley* by Gerald W. Haslam and James D. Houston, editors.

CONSTANCY

Styles of friendship
may change for some people
along with their clothing

But you and I have remained
close friends
even through your gabardine years
of wide-legged trousers,
dark colored shirts
and cowboy ties

Who cares about clothes
when the years are darkening?
Just tell me what the weather's like
and keep reading the verses
from that dog-eared book

From the *Yard Sales* tape.

OKLAHOMA MATRON

You could say
along with her old
sot drunk dad, "That Bonita
has got it made."
satin
lace
leopard skin hostess robes
but in secret dreams
she runs away from the very
eyes of the Petroleum crowd
wearing a pair of
snowy floursack bloomers
and turns cartwheels in a
field of blackeyed susans
miles away from Tulsa

Appeared in *Sister Vayda's Song*, Hanging Loose Press, Brooklyn, NY, 1982.

FARM CHILDREN IN THE GRIP OF 1933

Coffee was grounds
flour was gone
cornmeal low
and fatback only a rind
February wind was ice
F.D.R. was a brand new voice

And we children played
a deadly game
each took a turn
at jumping off the top of the world
from a chicken house
calling
catch me
O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A
and didn't know why
we blamed our state

Appeared in *A Primer for Buford*, Hanging Loose Press, Brooklyn, NY, 1990.



Wilma E. McDaniel and her younger brother Harold. Courtesy James R. Chlebda Archive.

ISN'T THAT A PICTURE

There was hilarity
that day in front of number 57

All good natured
of course

But I heard it clearly
in words of truth
Isn't that a picture
for you
one person said

A university professor
in a costume
straight out of *Vogue*

and an Okie
two-room academic
in a cape made out
of upholstery material

Appeared in *Getting Love Down Right*,
Back40 Publishing, Sebastopol, CA, 2000.

QUESTIONS OF 1934

The tearing up
and moving out
bothered little kids
quite a bit
especially Jody Penschaw
he would ask
every night
Mama,
where will we sleep
tomorrow night
and who could blame
him
that question was on
the mind of every
mother
and father too
though men pretended
it didn't upset them
they had to concentrate
on that Road 66
that was running
through their minds

Appeared in *A Prince Albert Wind*, Mother Road
Publications, Albuquerque, NM, 1994.

SURVIVAL

This has been a morning
to forget
starting with an empty coffee can

I knew last night the can was
empty
but it was too late for shopping

I made a pot of orange pekoe
but a workday morning
is no teatime affair

Then I found water in the shower
cold as a mountain stream
I gave up
put on a Goodwill dress
and ran for the 8:10 bus

Appeared in *Getting Love Down Right*,
Back40 Publishing, Sebastopol, CA, 2000.

NAMING A POET

Some relatives
not close enough by love
to really matter

would command
the awkward girl with eyes
that didn't match

pick up your bare feet
don't drag them across the
splintered floor

pick up your floursack dress
and hang it on a rusty nail
until a woman called from

outside the broken window
pick up your name
and write

Appeared in *Sister Vayda's Song*, Hanging Loose
Press, Brooklyn, NY, 1982.



UNITED WE STAND: CONNECTING THROUGH CULTURE **CONVENING**



Oklahoma Humanities (OH) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) recently welcomed state and jurisdictional humanities councils to Oklahoma City to share and celebrate work done under the *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture* initiative. This special convening was made possible by a \$100,000 grant awarded by the Henry Luce Foundation.

"We were proud to support Oklahoma Humanities in co-hosting the *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture* convening," said Sean Buffington, Vice President of the Henry Luce Foundation. "The humanities are part of the fabric that binds us together as communities, as a nation. The work of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the state and jurisdictional councils strengthens that fabric in places it has begun to fray."

In 2023, NEH issued \$2.8 million to create a nationwide *United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture* program in all 56 U.S. states and jurisdictions that built united fronts against hate at the community and national levels. NEH partnered with each of its state and jurisdictional affiliates to develop localized and place-based humanities programming that fostered cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and community resilience; educated the public on the history of domestic extremism and hate-based violence; promoted civic engagement, information literacy, and

social cohesion; and deepened public understanding of community, state, and national history.

On September 16-17, more than 100 representatives from the state and jurisdictional humanities councils met in Oklahoma City to discuss this important work through facilitated conversations, site visits, including the Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum and Oklahoma Contemporary, and working sessions that focused on strengthening communities and maximizing the impact, scale, and visibility of the humanities to address hate-motivated violence.

"As Americans we share a responsibility for understanding and embracing our diverse cultural histories, traditions, and experiences, and for opposing hate-based violence and extremism," said NEH Chair Shelly C. Lowe (Navajo). "The humanities strengthen mutual understanding by providing the context, history, and models of discourse that remind us of our common purpose and shared humanity."

"*United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture* is a critical initiative," said OH Executive Director Caroline Lowery. "We were honored to be a first-time recipient of a Henry Luce Foundation Grant to support this convening and were excited to welcome our state and jurisdictional colleagues to Oklahoma. It was an opportunity to listen and to learn from one another and we hope attendees left inspired and energized about the power and impact of the humanities."

NOTEWORTHY



FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Sarah Milligan, Chair

It continues to be my absolute joy to work alongside my fellow Board of Trustee Members in support of the mission of Oklahoma Humanities (OH). Although we have changes in the coming year as many of our longtime Board Members complete their terms of service, I am excited to welcome the new Members who will be starting theirs November 1.

I would like to take time to thank Board Members Alba Weaver, Don Holladay, Drs. Benjamin Alpers, Thomas Kirk, Lynne Simpson, and Annie Holt for dedicating their time and knowledge towards ensuring OH remains a meaningful state-serving organization. Representing a collective 23 years, their service has shaped the sustainability and growth of OH and will continue to do so far into the future. We hope to see them at many of the OH-supported events.

I look forward to working with our newest Members in the coming year and creating opportunities to increase our support for humanities engagement among diverse communities. Explore our calendar of events to see what sparks your interest in the coming months! Check out the *Museum on Main Street* exhibition in Cheyenne, Weatherford, or Bethany, join our dynamic book club, *Let's Talk About It*, or experience one of our grant-supported projects and programs across the state.

As always, thank you for your own interest in learning something new and for picking up this edition of our award-winning *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine. We hope you found something worth sharing!

ABOUT OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Oklahoma Humanities (OH) strengthens communities by helping Oklahomans learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives, and participate knowledgeably in civic life. As the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, OH provides and supports programming for the general public that uses humanities disciplines (such as history, literature, ethics, and philosophy) to deeply explore what it means to be human. OH accepts grant applications from nonprofits across the state for programs that may take the form of museum exhibits, film festivals, teacher workshops, oral history projects, or other formats that best serve local communities. OH also administers programs that provide free access to cultural humanities content, including: *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine; *Let's Talk About It*, a reading and discussion series; and *Museum on Main Street*, a collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution to provide traveling exhibits to small rural communities. Visit our website to find an event near you, read magazine archives, or explore OH programs and grant opportunities. We look forward to hearing from you. (405) 235-0280 | okhumanities.org | ohc@okhumanities.org



OKLAHOMA
HUMANITIES

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Oklahoma Humanities is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The NEH was established as a federal grantmaking agency by the U.S. Congress in 1965 to support research, education, preservation, and public projects in the humanities. As the state affiliate, Oklahoma Humanities receives an annual General Operating Support Award to facilitate grantmaking for humanities education, lifelong learning, and public programs at the local level.

The federal appropriation administered by Oklahoma Humanities in FY 2023 was \$1,062,703.00.

REVENUE & EXPENSES

OH Total Revenue was \$1,449,535
(grants=\$1,303,912; contributions=\$60,943; and other=\$84,680).

OH Total Expenses were \$1,351,715
(programs=\$852,402; admin=\$480,193; and fundraising=\$19,120).

1,979

BOOK LOVERS

Attended *Let's Talk About It* discussion events in 24 Oklahoma communities

**I love my library!
I appreciate this program
that allowed me to think
critically about literature.**

—Piedmont
Library
participant



INDIVIDUAL DONORS

Oklahoma Humanities extends its appreciation to the following individuals for support of our organization and programs:

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25,500

MAGAZINES

Delivered to individuals, educators, and nonprofits in 77 Oklahoma counties

I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate not only the high level of articles that are presented, but the wonderful diversity of presentations in the magazine. Thank you for your work.

—Rev. Dr. George E. Young, Sr., OK State Senator, District 48 (OKC); Pastor, Greater Mt. Carmel Baptist Church, Oklahoma City



194,638

INDIVIDUALS SERVED

Community Grants totaling \$241,926 were awarded to 31 organizations. In addition, eight NEH Special Initiative Grants were awarded totaling \$82,000 and one Partnership Grant was awarded totaling \$5,000.

Thank you for your work to amplify the voices of our ancestors.

—*Cultures of the Americas* seminar attendee

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NEXT UP: TECHNOLOGY | SPRING/SUMMER 2025

Technology. Not a field of the humanities, but as our next issue reveals, not as far afield as we might think. We'll explore the algorithms and x-rays making Herculeaneum scrolls legible after nearly 2,000 years; the competing anxiety and acceptance surrounding AI and its applications; how Greenwood Rising invites visitors into the past through holography; the bionic potential of treating rheumatoid arthritis; the popularity and possibilities of genetic genealogy, and more. Technology and the humanities aren't incompatible. They are interconnected.