



FALL | WINTER 2023

OKLAHOMA  
**HUMANITIES**

CULTURE | ISSUES | IDEAS



**STORIES**



## PERSPECTIVE

### FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine explores the theme of stories and as another year closes, we reflect on our own—those we have told, those we will, and the individuals and organizations that have made them possible.

This year has been shaped by unique opportunities to expand our work statewide through both national initiatives and local collaborations. Additional funding for National History Day will encourage increased diversity among participants and judges, expand outreach to rural and tribal schools, and extend educational resources to more teachers statewide.

The large-scale “United We Stand” initiative (see p. 44) will use the humanities and cultural experiences to combat hate and amplify the work of six in-state agencies while connecting Oklahoma to the other 56 state, jurisdictional, and territorial humanities councils around the nation.

On the local level, our work with the Oklahoma Museums Association (OMA) will continue as we provide funding and resources to enable professional development opportunities, training, and educational resources specifically for rural, small, or isolated museums. I want to especially thank Brenda Granger, Executive Director of OMA, and the OMA Board of Directors for partnering with us on this important work to engage with and strengthen Oklahoma’s 500+ museums.

Finally, a burgeoning partnership with 4-H will increase student participation and access to the next Smithsonian traveling exhibit *Voices and Votes: Democracy in America* touring rural Oklahoma in 2024-2025 (see p. 5).

Our flagship programs will continue telling stories and helping others tell theirs. Expanded grant opportunities will serve both new and longstanding humanities-based public programs statewide. *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine content will reflect public discourse and the collective consciousness, and new reading and discussion themes for *Let’s Talk About It* will illuminate under-told narratives and connect audiences to their own.

I hope to see you at one of our many programs and events around the state in the coming year. We are grateful for your interest and support. Thank you for being a part of our story!

### CAROLINE LOWERY

Executive Director  
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# OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

Culture | Issues | Ideas



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LEFT: *The Love Potion*, Evelyn De Morgan, 1903. The De Morgan Museum at Cannon Hall [PD] Wikipedia. Read more at "The Editor's Desk," page 6.

ON THE COVER: Woman dressed for Day of the Dead; photo by Ramon Hernandez, pexels.com

Reader Feedback



Spring/Summer FOOD, "A Readable Feast," is so impressive—a keepsake edition. Thank you.

—Catherine B. Wootten, Chickasha

From our FOOD authors:

Just a quick note of thanks about your tremendous work editing the FOOD issue. The whole issue is a real treat, and many people have told me how drawn in they are by all the articles.

—Zenia Kish, The University of Tulsa

The entire issue is, as always, wonderful—and the editorial process was the most engaging and productive I've ever experienced. With deep gratitude for your high standards and for the vitality you bring to the humanities in Oklahoma.

—Bruce Dean Willis  
The University of Tulsa

I am happy to be among friends on the beautiful poetry pages. I am looking forward to the fascinating articles, too. The photography in this issue is gorgeous.

—Sandra Soli, Oklahoma City

2023 Magazine Awards

GREAT PLAINS JOURNALISM AWARDS

Oklahoma Humanities (OH) is proud to announce the magazine's recent success at the 2023 Great Plains Journalism Awards. OH staff members and contributors were honored across two categories in magazine writing and design. Hosted and sponsored by the Tulsa Press Club, the awards are a regional competition among eight states that recognizes excellence in writing, design, and photography among newspaper, magazine, web, and TV journalism. OH magazine contributors placing among finalists included: Oklahoma

Humanities associate editor Kimberly Roblin for Magazine Feature Writing, "The Shorthand of Thomas Jefferson," and Oklahoma Humanities staff and graphic designer Anne Richardson for Great Plains Magazine of the Year.

See these award-winning entries from the CODE (Spring/Summer 2022) and ETC. (Fall/Winter 2022) issues online at [okhumanities.org/archives](http://okhumanities.org/archives)

**THE 2023 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!

THANK YOU!

The work of Oklahoma Humanities is funded in part thanks to the generous grants, awards, and partnerships provided by these organizations. We are grateful for their ongoing investment and engagement!

**OKLAHOMA CITY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**  
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\$25,000 for *Let's Talk About It*

Carolyn Watson  
**RURAL Oklahoma**  
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An Affiliate of the OKLAHOMA CITY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION  
\$15,000 for *Museum on Main Street*



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*Oklahoma Humanities* magazine is an award-winning collection of culture, 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. Subscribe online: okhumanities.org or call (405) 235-0280.

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*Oklahoma Humanities* awards include 52 Oklahoma Society of Professional Journalists awards, including multiple first place honors for Best Writing, Best Cover, Best Feature Photo, and Best PR Publication; 25 Great Plains Journalism awards, including firsts for best Magazine Feature Writing and best Magazine Page Design, and as a finalist for the Great Plains Magazine of the Year; three Central Oklahoma IABC Bronze Quill Awards; the State Historic Preservation Officer's Citation of Merit; and an Oklahoma Heritage Distinguished Editorial Award.

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specphotoops/unsplash.com



**VOICES  
AND  
VOTES**  
DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

## Oklahoma Humanities announces tour sites for the Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibit *Voices and Votes: Democracy in America*

The Constitution's call to action is clear. Democracy is a verb! Explore the complex history of our nation: The Revolution. Civil Rights. Suffrage. Elections. Protests. Citizenship. From small towns to big cities, the state of our union is a work in progress and every community and individual plays a part.

Nowata Historical Society & Museum  
April 13, 2024 – May 25, 2024

Bristow Train Depot & Museum  
June 1, 2024 – July 13, 2024

Anadarko Community Library  
July 20, 2024 – August 31, 2024

Cheyenne-Roger Mills County  
Chamber of Commerce & Tourism  
September 7, 2024 – October 19, 2024

Al Harris Library at  
Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Weatherford  
October 26, 2024 – December 7, 2024

Bethany Library  
December 14, 2024 – January 25, 2025

Visit the exhibit at a location near you  
and watch for local programming!



Smithsonian  
Institution



OKLAHOMA  
HUMANITIES

*Voices and Votes: Democracy in America* is part of Museum on Main Street, a collaboration between the Smithsonian Institution and State Humanities Councils nationwide. Based on an exhibition by the National Museum of American History, it has been made possible in Oklahoma by Oklahoma Humanities. Oklahoma programming is supported by The Carolyn Watson Rural Oklahoma Community Foundation, The Gerald H. Westby, Jr. Foundation, and 2 Fellas Moving Company. Support for Museum on Main Street has been provided by the United States Congress.



## THE EDITOR'S DESK

CARLA WALKER

carla@okhumanities.org

If, as the saying goes, “art is the thing,” then the humanities are the meaning we project onto and glean from it. A recent encounter may illustrate. In an online search for a Halloween-inspired illustration for our “Contents” page, results included this beautiful sorceress by artist Evelyn De Morgan: *Fall colors*. Black cat. *Purr*-fect. Reading more about the artwork reveals the humanities themes hidden in De Morgan’s allegorical subtext.

At first glance, the artist presents us with a meddling maven. From the title, *The Love Potion*, we can speculate that her conjuring portends the fate of the couple embracing just outside her window. Rich robes, fine tapestries, and a well-used book collection tell us this is no run-of-the-mill crone. De Morgan hints at more.

Born to a family of privilege, Mary Evelyn (née Pickering) De Morgan, 1855-1919, was tutored at home with her brothers, giving her a wider education than most females of the Victorian era. Typical of British middleclass families, studies would have included Latin and languages, classical literature and mythology, and the sciences—all evident in De Morgan’s work. European travels with her artist uncle exposed her to the Old Masters, fueling a passion to create her own artistic expressions. Against the expectations of her time, she entered the Slade School of Art, one of the first women to do so, using her gender-neutral middle name, Evelyn, to more successfully compete in the male-dominated art world.

De Morgan was no “art for art’s sake” painter. She used her canvases to communicate

staunch views on feminism, social consciousness, philosophy, and Spiritualism—eloquently articulated in *The Love Potion*. Art historian Elise Lawton Smith observes that De Morgan’s sorceress is an intellectual: “The woman is presented to us as a learned and civilized scholar rather than a wild, night-roaming witch.” The titles in her bookcase, Smith explains, indicate study of respected philosophers, particularly Paracelsus, a Renaissance physician, botanist, and astrologer whose color theory marked the progression of the soul toward enlightenment: from the black state of sin depicted in the cat, through the white dawn of purification reflected in the cloth at the alchemist’s side, moving toward strength and wisdom represented in the red lion tapestries, and finally the golden state of salvation evidenced in the sumptuous yellow of her garment (*Evelyn Pickering De Morgan and the Allegorical Body*, 2002). The De Morgan Foundation further explains that in *The Love Potion*, the artist subverts the female stereotype to celebrate “a strong, powerful, skilled intelligent protagonist, capable of reaching the enlightenment she herself sought.”

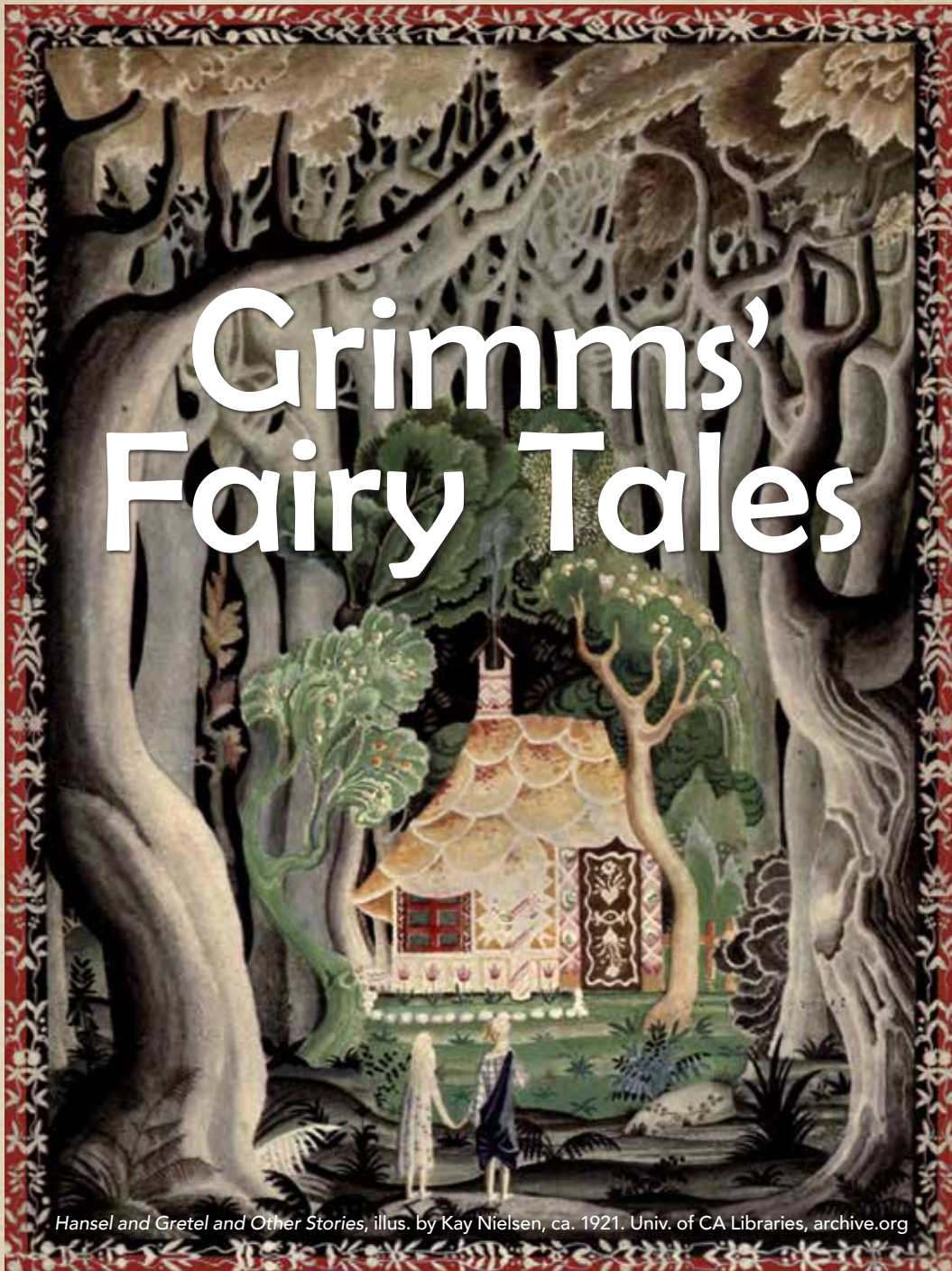
Taken alone, the artwork is resplendent; knowing the meaning intended by the artist makes it transcendent.

The humanities are *the story* that weaves through all art and knowledge of the human experience. Next time you attend a museum exhibit, take time to contemplate the titles and text next to the art and artifacts—the full package, the rewarding experience of the arts and humanities.

**W**hat are the humanities? That is the question. At Oklahoma Humanities we strive to foster public dialogue, but it’s difficult to gain support if you can’t explain what you do and how it makes a difference in people’s lives.

Some of the confusion lies in the ubiquitous pairing of “the arts and humanities”—which are indeed inseparable, yet distinctly different. A short-handle way to think about it is: “If you’re doing it, it’s the arts. If you’re talking about it, it’s the humanities.” A more thorough (and deserving) explanation would be: If you’re creating art, composing music, writing a novel, or attending the performance of a ballet, symphony, or opera, you’re interacting with the arts. If you’re attending a lecture about the interpretation of artwork or the aesthetics of the artist who created it; if you’re discussing the newest bestseller with your book club; if you’re researching the headlines, personal diaries, and photo collections of a period to judge the historical impact of a person, people, or era, you’re engaging with the humanities.

# Grimms' Fairy Tales



*Hansel and Gretel and Other Stories*, illus. by Kay Nielsen, ca. 1921. Univ. of CA Libraries, archive.org

## *From cultural preservation to culture wars*

JACK ZIPES



the Brothers Grimm are turning in their graves, who could blame them? Among the more radical contemporary revisions of the Grimms' tales, Red Riding Hood has announced she is a lesbian, the

Wolf has become a vegetarian, and Cinderella refuses to marry the Prince. At the same time, there are softened versions in which the Wolf never lays his paws on Little Red or Grandma, and Cinderella is pathetically nice to her stepsisters. Never could the Grimms have

imagined how we would modify and “Disneyfy” their tales through censorship and criticism. This fiddling is ironic since the Grimms were folklore pioneers with a radical touch of their own, who wanted to give voice to the people no matter how crude or utopian their concerns and dreams.

### A Tale of Two Brothers

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were born in 1785 and 1786 in the quiet central-German village of Hanau near Frankfurt. At ten and eleven years of age, they experienced a severe decline in social status when their father, a district magistrate, died. The brothers could no longer depend on money and rank to guarantee a secure future; they would rely on brains, drive, and each other. Both were

outstanding students at school in Kassel and later at the University of Marburg where they studied law, though they never practiced due to family responsibilities (four younger siblings and a mother to support) and disruptions of the Napoleonic Wars.

Instead they became librarians and scholars of philology, the study of languages, while remaining faithfully devoted to one another. In 1805, Jacob wrote to Wilhelm from Paris:

Let us never ever separate, and even supposing that one of us wanted to go to some other place, the other would at once have to give up everything. We have now become so accustomed to our communal life that even this present separation could be enough to drive me to death.

Even when Wilhelm married, the two brothers continued to live together. Their vows of dedication formed the profound basis of all their work.

In 1808, their friend Clemens Brentano, a gifted writer of German Romanticism, requested help in collecting tales for a volume he intended to publish. The Grimms collected oral tales with the help of friends and acquaintances in Kassel, and selected stories from old books and documents in their own library. Though the brothers did not have a clear idea about the significance of collecting folk tales in this initial phase, they soon realized that the stories contained valuable revelations about the customs and practices of the German people. In fact, the brothers believed that the tales might help form a cultural bond for Germans at a time when the French occupied many German principalities and there was no unified nation-state.

Brentano ultimately abandoned his project and subsequently lost the manuscript of fifty-four texts prepared by the brothers. Luckily they had copies and with the encouragement of friend and writer Achim von Arnim they published Volume I of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children’s and Household Tales*) in 1812, their first major collection of eighty-six folktales. Volume II followed three years later with an additional seventy. The preface outlined their reason for documenting the stories:

*Cinderella* (ca. 1890-1895), Jenny Nyström, illustrator. National Library of Norway [PD] Wikimedia





It was perhaps just the right time to record these tales since those people who should be preserving them are becoming more and more scarce. . . . Wherever the tales still exist, they continue to live in such a way that nobody ponders whether they are good or bad, poetic or crude. People know them and love them because they have simply absorbed them in a habitual way. And they take pleasure in them without having any reason. This is exactly why the custom of storytelling is so marvelous.

The two brothers continued to systematically gather oral tales, songs, proverbs, legends, and other folkloric materials. Already established scholars in philology, literature, and law, they now wanted to demonstrate how “high literature” not only evolved from traditional folk material but also forced it to recede during the Renaissance and take refuge among the folk as oral tradition. The Grimms wanted to preserve these original sources of German literature before they were forgotten, while confirming the debt high culture owed to the common people. In this sense, the Grimms were radically democratic because the tales represented the views, behavior, laws, beliefs, and practices of common folk.

This democratic act of preserving and giving to the people what was theirs went beyond literature; while professors and librarians at the University of Göttingen, they took a stand for civil rights against despotic King Ernest August II, forcing Jacob to eventually flee. Years later, when the Revolution of 1848 erupted in Germany, Jacob was elected to the civil parliament and was considered to be the most prominent among representatives at the National Assembly in Frankfurt am Main.

### Classic Culture to Counterculture

Though they wrote well over twenty scholarly books, hundreds of articles, and established the first great modern German dictionary of their time, the Grimms continually expanded and improved their collection of *Children’s and Household Tales* until

the last edition in 1857. They invited storytellers to their home and listened to servants, tailors’ wives, retired soldiers, nursemaids, and more. The Grimms tweaked and edited texts, addressed variants in footnotes, and sometimes replaced entire versions with others they preferred. They determined not only which story would be told in each new edition, but how.

By the time Wilhelm died in 1859 and Jacob in 1863, they had published seven revised editions of the collection along with ten smaller editions. Little did they realize that of all their great achievements, the *Children’s and Household Tales* would become their most important work—second only to the Bible as a bestseller in the German-speaking world.



*Snow White and the Dwarfs*, (1895), Eugen Klimsch, illustrator. The New York Public Library. [digitalcollections.nypl.org](http://digitalcollections.nypl.org)



The stories the Grimms preserved also engendered some of the fiercest debates in children’s literature. The tales portrayed violence and corporal punishment to make a stark impression on readers and to set a moral or ethical example: Cinderella’s stepsisters cut off part of their feet to fit into the golden shoe and later had their eyes pecked out by pigeons as punishment for their greed and cruelty. In *Snow White*, the Evil Queen was forced to dance to her death wearing red-hot slippers. The Wolf gobbled up the grandmother and Little Red Riding Hood, only to have stones sewn into his belly. Hansel and Gretel killed the Witch by pushing her into an oven.

These depictions of cruelty may be the reason why the collection, though popular, was never read in its entirety in respectable middleclass households in the nineteenth century. In the name of decency and propriety, a process began to minimize or eliminate the violence that appeared in the original versions.

In America, the sanitization reflected puritanical sensibilities and changing views of childrearing. Though horror and perversity were scrubbed in the twentieth



The Grimm brothers at the house of Dorothea Viehmann (one of the most important sources of fairy tales in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*). Illustration after a picture by Louis Katzenstein from *Die Gartenlaube* (1892) [PD] Wikimedia

century—especially in Disney adaptations of *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* which drip with sentimentality—the portrayal of relationships between women and men were unchanged. Classic fairy tales featured passive, always beautiful princesses waiting for daring, handsome princes. In response, hundreds of feminist, non-sexist fairy tales have been published in the last twenty-five years, attesting to the great discontent with gender stereotypes and anachronistic views presented in the tales.

Given this revision and commodification, modern versions of the tales are far removed from the Grimms’ endeavor to preserve the roots of German popular culture. Though they believed they were “revolutionizing” folklore in the nineteenth century, little did the brothers know their tales would still figure in the culture wars of our times. Now, as then, there is a deep sense that fairy tales matter in the way we make sense of our lives. The stories we tell ultimately tell us about ourselves.

JACK ZIPES is Professor Emeritus of German and comparative literature at the University of Minnesota. He has published widely on folk and fairy tales. His most recent publications include a collection of essays, *Buried Treasures: The Power of Political Fairy Tales* (Princeton University Press, 2023), Gower Wilson’s *Green, Silver, and Red Tales* (2023), and Rolf Brandt’s *Haunting and Hilarious Fairy Tales* (2022).

**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “Fairy Tales at CU Boulder,” Univ. of Colorado Boulder website. Once upon a time there was a database of more than 2,000 rare books that told tall tales. Browse them all at [colorado.edu](http://colorado.edu)



*Sleeping Beauty*, Heinrich Leutemann or Carl Offterdinger, illustrator. Published by Wilhelm Effenberg (F. Loewes Verlag, ca. late-nineteenth century) [PD] Wikimedia



# STORIES

## FROM THE

# WORKPLACE

The folklore and folklife of occupations

NANCY GROCE

**A**s a folklorist, I am drawn to the stories people tell about their experiences, families, friends, and communities. Based on actual events, these narratives are often called “oral histories” to distinguish them from fairy tales and deliberately composed fiction. Oral histories can do many things: help organize memories; transmit essential and not-so-essential knowledge; entertain us; define group boundaries; establish community; and strengthen interpersonal relationships. The details and events they commemorate are often altered, transformed, expanded, and elaborated over years of retelling. Sometimes the changes are made intentionally to improve the story. Other times, variations creep in from faulty recollection, unfamiliarity with ancestral languages or cultures, or just misunderstandings and mishearing. In the end, it matters little whether the stories are strictly true or not. What I find fascinating is *why* people choose to tell them.

Stories about workers and working, a branch of folklore called occupational *folklore* or *folklife*, are a

favorite, in part because of my job in the American Folklife Center (AFC) at the Library of Congress (LOC) in Washington, DC. I direct a large documentation program called the Occupational Folklife Project (OFP). Over the past twelve years, teams of OFP researchers have fanned out across the United States to interview and document individual American workers about how they earn their livings. Inspired by previous occupational folklife survey projects (including the 1930s Works Progress Administration’s *American Life Histories* project, and earlier documentarians like journalist Studs Terkel and labor-focused folklorist Archie Green), OFP fieldworkers have recorded in-depth audio and video interviews with more than 1,800 workers in more than 100 occupations.

Interviewees include home health care aides in Oregon, Louisiana locksmiths, classroom teachers in Wisconsin, Vermont garbage collectors, Tennessee professional wrestlers, meat plant workers in Iowa and Kansas, New York electricians, and funeral home workers in North Carolina. Each hour-long interview enriches and expands

our national record and is available to researchers and members of the public, now and for generations to come.

### STORYTELLING AT WORK

Work-related stories fall into a couple of key categories. The first are *in-group stories* told to and for fellow workers at specific jobsites. These tales often feature the exploits of company founders, bosses, or coworkers who helped establish or mold the culture of a workplace. Often told by older, more experienced workers to younger or recent hires during breaks, meals, and unstructured downtime, they not only illustrate expectations and norms but also subtly reinforce the status of the tellers as experts and in-house authorities. Stories of unusual incidents, unreasonable bosses, daunting assignments, and challenging customers are also told among workers *outside* their shared workplace, at company parties, picnics, reunions, union halls, tradeshow, or conferences.

Mike Peabody, a garbage collector and recycler in Barre, Vermont, provided a humorous yet harrowing example of an in-group story during his interview for the OFP collection “Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont’s Waste Management Industry.”

[The public] heard that we quote-unquote “take everything.” And so when they show up and we’re not open, or they come by at midnight—because I guess they expect us to be there at midnight—they just leave the bag.

[At] our offices the next town over in Montpelier, someone dumped about 40 pounds of potassium nitrate. And there was just a note taped to the box that said, “Found this while digging fences. Heard you guys took dangerous stuff.” We almost called in the bomb squad! It’s not safe to handle, especially once it’s been wetted like that. The person who brought it to us probably threw it in their truck and was like, “Oh, I should leave a note. That’d be the polite thing to do.”

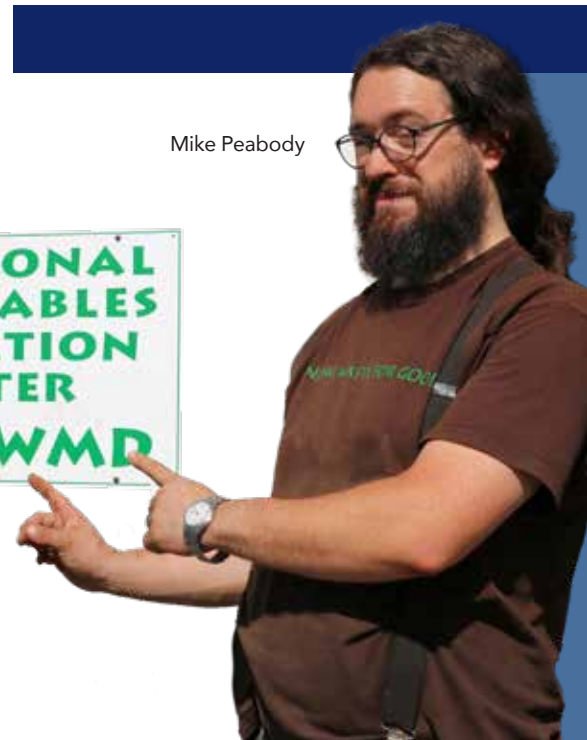
Mike likely told this story for several reasons. First, he found it amusing that anyone would do something so stupid with a hazardous substance and assume that leaving a note made their actions acceptable. Telling the story also allowed him to express his frustration with thoughtless members of the public and emphasize the work-related dangers he and his coworkers sometimes encounter. Indirectly, it drew attention to the expertise he

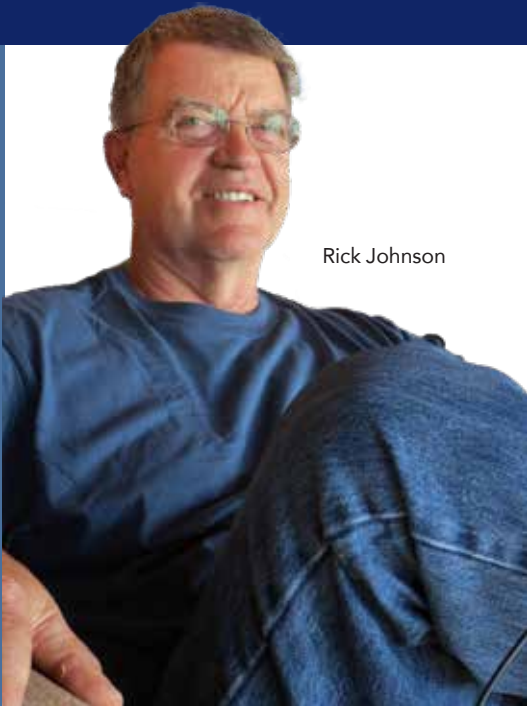
needs, like knowing how to handle bomb-grade materials, to do his job properly.

*Cautionary tales*, stories describing dire consequences of unsafe, inattentive, or just plain stupid on-the-job behavior are particularly popular on American worksites. They are shared, and often appropriated by new tellers, as happening either to them or to a “friend of a friend” (FOAF). Electrical lineman Rick Johnson of Port Townsend, Washington, interviewed by folklorist Deborah Fant, told several cautionary tales about his high-risk profession—including this one, a FOAF story he “heard about” while working with a transmission crew in the Cascade Mountains wilderness.

Erickson Air-Crane were flying these towers in, building a power line over Stampede Pass. It was a line from Grand Coulee Dam to Covington Substation. They give them out in about 30- to 40-mile sections. Erickson [the construction company] used big Sikorsky helicopters to assemble sections of the tower in one place and fly them to where they were needed. Guys would stack them and throw a couple bolts in them and then the torque crew would come along behind and fill in all the splice plates with bolts. Story went around about some guy that stuck his finger in a hole of a tower and the steel shifted, and he lost his finger. Then, when he came back to work later, somebody asked him what happened and he stuck another finger in the tower and lost it.

Mike Peabody





Rick Johnson

Fant noted that “Rick didn’t know if it’s a true story, but it’s a *good* story.” And like many cautionary stories, it doesn’t matter whether it was true or not. Line workers told the story amongst themselves to highlight what *not* to do on the job.

#### “ABOUT WORK”—STORYTELLING FOR OUTSIDERS

Stories workers tell about their jobs when away from their worksites are usually told to entertain friends and families in social situations. These stories tend to be longer because the audience must be brought up to speed on shared workplace knowledge. Such stories tend to be more fully formed, with descriptive beginnings, memorable action, clear climaxes, and colorful denouements and epilogues. Most are humorous and/or disturbing, recounting gruesome accidents or injuries often caused by a protagonist’s or employer’s misconduct. Also notable, storytellers frequently place themselves as central players and as leaders and heroes of their narratives.

One of my favorite examples of these “about work” stories is what folklorists call a *trickster tale*—a prankster story that highlights the wit and cunning of the storyteller. It was told by Chicago ironworker and master storyteller Sharon Sisson, during an interview with folklorist Clark Douglas “Bucky” Halker for the OFP “Cultural Traditions of Iron Workers in America’s the Upper Midwest.” There were few women when Sharon entered the trade in the 1970s, and she told this story to demonstrate how she established boundaries as a female worker and “got even” with a coworker harassing her:

There was one guy there named Mario and he was married and he had kids. And the guy obviously had the hots for me. He was asking me to go out with him. . . . He used to drip water on me from up above, little drops of water, and I said, “That’s it. I’m going to put a frickin’ snake in his lunchbox! . . . This guy needs to be taught a lesson.”

So I went to the pet store that night and they didn’t have a snake cheap enough, but they did have a spider. A ginormous tarantula. And they wanted \$25 bucks for it. And I told the lady, “I’ll give you \$15 cash and I’ll bring it back tomorrow and give me \$10 back.”

And she said, “Okay, do you want to rent my spider?”

“Yeah, I only need it for a day.”

So she’s like, “Okay. Here.”

So, I take the spider. I dump it in the guy’s lunchbox. Everybody knew except him, everybody knew. So they’re all kind of watching out the corner of their eye. And he flips up the top of his lunchbox and he reaches in without looking. And everyone’s going, “Aaah.” (Deep breath.) You could feel the sides of the trailer just suck in from everybody going, “Aaah”—afraid he’s going to bring this spider out, right?

He brings out his sandwich and eats his sandwich. And after a while he gets his chips. Then he drags the lunchbox over, he has to look in it for something, and there’s the spider. He jumped up, kicked the lunchbox across the floor and it ends up at my feet. “There’s . . . there’s . . . there’s a spider in there!”

I reach in and picked out the tarantula. “It’s just a little old hairy spider.” I swear to God, he peed his pants. He never messed with me again.

Sharon is an exceptionally gifted storyteller. She sets up the conflict and her failed attempts to remediate it; reveals her plan for revenge, building tension as she describes her fellow workers’ reactions; adds suspense when the antihero reaches into his lunchbox several times; then brings the story to a climax by revealing how he shamed himself before her and, more importantly, their coworkers. To ensure that listeners don’t miss the point, she ends her story with an epilogue: “He never messed with me again.”

This well-structured tale of good triumphing over evil, of wrongs righted, of retribution and comeuppance is a great workplace story. In telling it, Sharon established herself as a powerful, independent woman and a serious worker who used creativity and cunning to achieve a clear victory. Did things really happen as Sharon tells it? Who knows? But it does make a great story.

Sometimes the work-related story involves clients or customers, such as the very sweet, personal anecdote that North Carolina undertaker Heather Campbell Hill shared with folklorist Sarah Bryant as part of her OFP interview for “Funeral Services Workers in the Carolinas.”

I was taking an urn to the church one time, and I was just driving my own car, and I sat the urn down beside me in my seat, and a ladybug came and landed on the lid. I said, “Well, hello! You’re coming with me.” And then I got [to the church] and I told the family. I thought it might be nice. And they’re like (gasps), “You’re kidding! That was her favorite! That was her visiting.” So I love that story.

To Heather, who feels “Whatever happens when we die is the greatest mystery, and we’re not supposed to know until it happens,” the story provides comfort and hope, if not certainty about the afterlife. “Maybe we’ll all be back together again someday. If I only had proof. A notarized statement would be nice.”

### CREATING COMMUNITY THROUGH STORIES

The reasons, settings, and audiences may differ, but we all tell stories. Even folklorists swap tales—like the story about the fieldworker who finished a long session with



Heather Campbell Hill

an important interviewee only to discover the recording device was never turned on. Or the respected senior folklore professor who was such a bore he put *himself* to sleep while lecturing. Perhaps one day the LOC’s Occupational Folklife Project will archive those tales as we do with other professions.

For now, we at the American Folklife Center focus on collecting stories of American workers because we believe they are worth documenting and studying. They are significant factors in creating and maintaining workplace culture and community, providing important insight into the knowledge, skills, and attitudes valued by specific trades.

Next time you ask someone about their job, or hear people trading anecdotes about work-related experiences, pay close attention. They’re telling more than just stories. They’re telling you about the lore and life of folks at work.

NANCY GROCE is a folklorist and ethnomusicologist, working as a Senior Folklife Specialist for the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. She received a PhD from the University of Michigan and has worked for numerous public sector organizations, including the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the New York Council for the Humanities. Her long-standing interest in occupational folklore is reflected in many publications, including *Lox, Stocks and Backstage Broadway: Iconic Trades of New York City* (Smithsonian, 2010).

### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- *America Works*, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Podcast based on interviews from the Occupational Folklife Project. [loc.gov/podcasts/america-works](http://loc.gov/podcasts/america-works)



Sharon Sisson



# Patience, Perspective, & the Power of Story

An Interview with  
**TONI ANN  
JOHNSON**

Scott LaMascus

**S**toryteller Toni Ann Johnson uses her skills as an actor, playwright, and fiction writer to tell powerful stories of race, reconciliation, and the effects of lingering racism. She is award-winning on stage and screen, and most recently with her story collection *Light Skin Gone to Waste* (University of Georgia Press, 2022), selected for the 2021 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. When I spoke to Johnson in Los Angeles and later by email, we explored the role stories can play in our understanding of truths, including matters many would rather forget.



**Scott LaMascus:** If you were joining the late Flannery O'Connor on her porch in Milledgeville, Georgia, what do you hope she would praise about your stories that were honored with the award named for her?

**Toni Ann Johnson:** I wouldn't expect Ms. O'Connor to praise *my* stories. Her racism would likely have prevented her from appreciating their subject matter. In her letters, she wrote:

About the Negroes, the kind I don't like is the philosophizing prophesying pontificating kind, the James Baldwin kind. Very ignorant but never silent. Baldwin can tell us what it feels like to be a Negro in Harlem but he tries to tell us everything else too.

O'Connor was put off by James Baldwin's writing because it dared to stray beyond the confines of being Black in Harlem. So I imagine she'd eschew *Light Skin Gone to Waste*, which is about Black people who refuse to live according to narrow, bigoted ideas about what they should be or do or have. In her letters (made available to scholars in 2014), she said she was repulsed by the sight of Blacks and Whites sitting together. It's unlikely I'd be welcome on Flannery O'Connor's porch.

**SL:** What might you ask O'Connor? What might you tell her?

**TAJ:** I admire and celebrate Ms. O'Connor's immense talent and achievements as a writer, and as a woman in a patriarchal culture, and I'm profoundly grateful for the prize that bears her name; however, she's not someone I'd seek to be in conversation with. I reject her inability to see Black humanity. I spent my childhood engaging in the futile effort to prove my humanity to those who refused to acknowledge it. I have no further interest in that endeavor.

In this hypothetical visit (I would not subject myself to), I might ask Ms. O'Connor if her views had evolved. I'd tell her I was inspired by the quality of her prose, intrigued and entertained by some of her characters, and I admired the way she structured her short stories, but that I stopped reading her work because her characterizations of Black people wounded me. I'd tell her that the fact that a Black editor was able to choose a Black writer for a prize in her name was, in my opinion, a kind of redress for

the racist ideas she promoted in her depictions of Black people.

**SL:** You have talked about the long gestation of these stories and your decision to submit them to O'Connor Prize judge Roxane Gay for consideration, about the work of cutting down an unpublished novel, shortening the manuscript to fit contest restrictions. As an author, what goes into that kind of perseverance, flexibility, and grit to see a work into print over all obstacles?

**TAJ:** Grit is the right word for it. The novel version of *Light Skin Gone to Waste* was twice the length of the published version. I conceived the book as a story collection. The first few stories I wrote got the attention of a literary agent who took on the project. When I delivered a first draft, the agent decided that rethinking the collection as a novel would make it more appealing to publishers. I didn't understand the vision and I didn't want to revise it as a novel, but I wanted to sell the book. Turning what was a collection into the agent's vision of a novel took multiple drafts and five arduous years. When, after all that, the book failed to sell, I was devastated and angry with myself for not trusting my own instincts.

I knew the reason the book hadn't sold as a novel was because it was *not* a novel. It was episodic by design. I returned to my original vision for the book. I was going to submit a version that included the novella *Homegoing* as the last story, but the word count limit forced me to cut it. (*Homegoing* was already set to be published by Accents Publishing in May of 2021, the same month I submitted to the Flannery O'Connor Award.)

I submitted what I had, feeling that it probably wouldn't win, but I hoped Roxane Gay might like my writing enough to be open to reading another manuscript for her imprint at Grove Atlantic. I was surprised to learn that a collection I worried wasn't quite complete could win. I was also gratified that all the energy I put into the work during the five years of development was not, after all, for nothing.

**SL:** What advice about the rigors of publication would you give to other writers?

**TAJ:** I would say: Have more patience than you think makes sense. You have to hang in there and not give up. You must keep writing, improving your

work, and submitting. You can't let yourself be defeated by rejection. On my first book, I gave up the agent search after only a few agents passed. Writers need grit. Your grit develops as you fail, and lose, and refuse to quit.

The launch of my screenwriting career might be considered easy because it happened after a play I wrote and acted in landed in the hands of an entertainment attorney who subsequently shared it with agent Dave Wirtshafter who read it, liked it, and signed me. From that point on, studio executives and producers were willing to work with me because of Wirtshafter's reputation. And because I had a specialty: writing about race and race relations.

It was a confluence of good fortune, but I was truly struggling by the time my break into the entertainment industry came when I was 30. I'd been studying acting from the time I was twelve and I began writing plays at

## The goal is to foster understanding of one another's perspective, to increase empathy, and to move toward harmony and social justice.

nineteen. I'd written many things that went nowhere. What might have appeared to be a lucky break was the result of years of preparation, dues paying, and financial difficulty as well as a lot of mental determination.

**SL:** Why have you pursued not one but several genres in your storytelling: short story, playwriting, screenwriting? Was that a purposeful choice? Do different stories call for different frameworks?

**TAJ:** As an acting student I was constantly reading plays, so that was a format I grew familiar with. When I started looking for acting work, I didn't look identifiably Black to the theatre world and I realized I needed to develop material for myself. That's how one of my early plays, *Gramercy Park is Closed to the Public*, developed. A film producer submitted the play to the Sundance Screenwriter's Lab and I was accepted.

Shortly thereafter, Wirtshafter launched my screenwriting career with that play, arranged a staged reading with me in the lead and Della Reese playing one of the main roles, and I began taking meetings for open

writing assignments. I did that for over a decade. After ten plus years of executing other people's ideas, I got tired of writing for hire and wanted to get back to my own voice—the voice I had found as a playwright. But I didn't want to study playwriting as I had in New York, so I focused on fiction, which led to my getting an MFA in Creative Writing. When I began studying the art of fiction I loved it and knew I could spend the rest of my life getting better at it.

**SL:** You have been extremely productive in storytelling—on stage, screens large and small, and in print—across changes in how audiences, publishing, and media operate. How are these changes shaping your emerging work?

**TAJ:** I've been focused on fiction, out of the film and TV world, for a while. Because I'm not writing for hire, the changes in audiences and media don't affect what I'm writing. I write about the characters, themes, ideas, and circumstances that interest me. I don't chase trends.

**SL:** Your latest book tells the story of racial and cultural reconciliations in a New York neighborhood. It speaks to our times of decreased social mobility and increased social disparity. The plots and characters seem to strike at the very heart of the lie that the U.S. has no class system. Your characters live with the implications of class in interesting ways—as social climbers, those born with status, or those who protect the privileges of status. What do you hope Americans learn about class from these stories and characters?

**TAJ:** I'm astonished by the idea that there are people in this country who think we have no class system. Poor people and people of color of any socioeconomic background have *always* been aware of class structure in America. I think most White people, too, whether poor, middle class, or wealthy are aware of class in this country. The hierarchy may be tacit; however, it's understood that Black people are implicitly at the bottom or near the bottom.

What my book expresses with regard to class is that some Black people can be and have been more educated and more affluent than some White people. There has been a class stratification among Black people in this country that precedes the Civil War. In the 1960s and 1970s the dominant culture did not seem aware of this. By and large, the culture was oblivious to the Black elite and the Black middle class and seemed to believe that

all Black people were low-income and had low intellectual aspirations. Even into the 1980s, when *The Cosby Show* aired, the prevailing perspective was that Black high achievement and affluence was a fantasy, not a reality within the Black population.

It never was a fantasy. Black professionals existed. Before White universities accepted Black people, there were Black universities educating doctors, lawyers, teachers, architects, artists, and other professionals. There has been a Black elite for hundreds of years.

In my book, I focused on a specific time, mid-century, when the majority of White people in my town had little exposure to affluent, educated Blacks and, in fact, did not believe in their existence. They had trouble seeing me because they had no frame of reference for me. I would have welcomed the opportunity to grow up knowing families similar to mine.

I wrote the stories to show readers a Black family they've likely not seen before. My family, on which the Arringtons are based, was *not* of the Black elite. My parents came from middle-class families. My father felt rejected by the Black elite as a young adult who didn't come from wealthy professional parents and, ultimately, he chose to separate from the Black community in favor of a White one.

**SL:** Which author has most influenced you most?

**TAJ:** James Baldwin. Kiese Laymon wrote that you have to read books at least twice to have really read them. I've read all of Baldwin's novels and stories and most of his nonfiction books *at least* twice. I've read *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* a few times. The characters and their world are familiar to me. I feel at home inside those books. I related to them. I admire Baldwin's voice and I'm awed by the way he layers in his analysis of social problems. I re-read a lot of his work in 2020 and it was astounding and sad how relevant it remains. Everything Baldwin writes about American racism is still extant today.

**SL:** Congratulations on your teaching role at Antioch University. Antioch's mission statement emphasizes social justice. How does your writing figure into Antioch's emphasis on "advancing social, economic, and environmental justice"?

**TAJ:** I often write about race relations. I've done so in movies such as *Ruby Bridges* (about integration) and *Crown Heights* (about tensions between disparate

communities). I also examine race relations in my stories and novels. I try to express the full humanity of characters of all races. The goal is to foster understanding of one another's perspective, to increase empathy, and to move toward harmony and social justice.

**SL:** What overarching message or goal are you seeking to accomplish in your work?

**TAJ:** It feels limiting to define one's work in those terms. But if I look at the body of what I've written it seems that I've been examining race and class with the kind of complexity that I observe. I'm always looking for contradictions to what's expected or assumed about the characters I write.

I grew up in a racist culture that, as I experienced it, looked for easy ways to define people. I'm drawn to the complicated, the unusual, and the unexpected, and so I've tended to write about the humanity of people who have stepped outside the parameters erected by the society they live in.

TONI ANN JOHNSON is the author of the novella *Homegoing* and the novel *Remedy for a Broken Angel*, which earned an NAACP Image Award nomination for Outstanding Literary Work by a Debut Author. She is a two-time winner of the Humanitas Prize for her screenplays *Ruby Bridges* (for Disney) and *Crown Heights* (for Showtime). Her essays and short fiction have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Callaloo*, and other publications. Johnson holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles and a BFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

SCOTT LAMASCUS is Director of the McBride Center for Public Humanities at Oklahoma Christian University. As an educator, writer, and public-humanities advocate, he is a recipient of a Challenge Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and served many years on the Board of Trustees for Oklahoma Humanities, including leadership as its Chair. He is on the staff of *Lunch Ticket* literary magazine. His recent writing appears in AWP's *The Writers Chronicle*, *Red Ogre Review*, and *Epiphany*.



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# STORIED TRADITIONS OF DAY OF THE DEAD

Not your average sugar-coated history of life and death in the Americas

ROBERT CON DAVIS-UNDIANO

**E**very culture in the world has some version of a yearly observance honoring the dead, often in summer or fall in connection with seasonal planting. In the Americas, this practice is imbued with the idea that at least once a year the dead may journey back to the living for a brief stay to commune with family and friends. Dating back before European contact in the Americas, early sixteenth-century Aztec culture had rituals for commemorating death and dying over a two-month period. The concept of death was also intimately tied to life through fertility figures such as Coatlicue, the goddess with two snakes' heads—one for life and one for death—who conveyed that life and death are united through a cycle of change that can never be broken. Today, it is common all over the Americas to set aside time to create altars dedicated to the memory of the dead, to visit cemeteries, and to pray for the deceased.

In Mexico, the Day of the Dead (*Día de Muertos*) is celebrated on November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> as a hybrid ritual of traditional Aztec and Catholic practices. Observances are both private and public. In homes, families construct altars (*ofrendas*) to display religious icons, images of the dead and their personal effects, the deceased person's favorite foods, and other specialties, notably *pan de muerto* (death bread). Marigolds abound so that their scent may guide the dead back to their relatives. Children play with sugar toys shaped like skulls (*calaveras*), skeletons, and caskets, while the adults remember and pray for departed family and friends.

In public activities, people visit cemeteries, clean relatives' grave sites, and share meals with the dead close by. In some large Mexican cities there is the frequent display of life-sized tableau scenes (*escenas*) in parks and other public venues. These scenes feature mannequins styled as skeletons (*muertos*) performing the mundane





tasks of daily life, seemingly frozen mid-act as they serve tea, attend sermons, dance, or work. They are happily oblivious to the fact that they are dead. The studied nonchalance of the *muertos* accentuates the paradox that the living who look upon the *escenas* may fail to identify their own journey toward death, to see that they, too, could succumb at any moment.

Day of the Dead in the United States has grown enormously popular since the early 1970s and is now widely celebrated, especially with young people. In the U.S. version, photographs of deceased relatives and friends are on display on home altars, much as in Mexico, often accompanied by miniature candy coffins and skeletons, Day of the Dead cookies, and other sugar treats. This frightening imagery in many ways re-creates Halloween and, in some cities in Mexico and the U.S., children even mark Day of the Dead by visiting neighbors to trick-or-treat and ask for small sugar skulls (*calaveritos*) and candies. Day of the Dead starts just as Halloween ends on October 31<sup>st</sup>, suggesting that the two holidays serve the same need.

However, the contrast between practices in Mexico and the United States points to very different conceptions of death. In Mexico, children frequently die as infants or at very young ages. Death has been a daily fact of life for thousands of years, and so Mexican Day of the Dead ceremonies face death with little buffering and encourage living with the reality of death and dying. By contrast, the United States is a wealthy culture that focuses on youth and material abundance. American society tends to confront death, or at least cope with it, in small doses. Halloween references death, but the emphasis

is on spirited fun. There are religious elements in the U.S. version of Day of the Dead, to be sure, but Mexican-American celebrations create a hybrid cultural mix of honoring the dead, protesting against social injustice, and advocating on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised. This style of honoring, yet modifying, traditional Mexican practices is a signature of Mexican-American culture.



The ubiquitous appearance of sugar in Day of the Dead practices is difficult to miss and seems to add interest for children during the solemnities. During the Days of the Dead in both Mexico and the United States, white granulated sugar is everywhere: molded into crosses, sculpted as festive skulls, skeletons, and miniature coffins. There are even intricate motion toys with moving sugar coffin lids and sugar arms and legs on skeletons.

What connects sugar and death? Why should they be paired? The answer dates to sixteenth-century Spanish colonialism, a time when sugar was an important commodity crop produced and processed for the growing New Spain market.

While massive sugar production happened in Peru, Brazil, and the Caribbean, Mexico at various times exceeded all countries in the region in sugar production and consumption. Whereas sugar's wholesale adoption in the daily diet did not reach working-class Europeans until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Indigenous peoples in the Americas in the late sixteenth century had already incorporated sugar into their diets and spent much time producing it.



The sixteenth-century Spanish succeeded with this labor-intensive crop only because they enslaved large numbers of Indigenous peoples to do the back-breaking planting and harvesting, literally working slaves to death. Overwork, infectious diseases, poor living conditions, and abusive treatment killed Native peoples at dizzying rates. From 1519 to 1620, the Indigenous community in New Spain declined from 25.2 million people at first contact to a shocking low of about 730,000 in the seventeenth century. It is no wonder that with so much loss—through abuse, disease, and overwork—the Aztecs connected death with sugar in their daily lives and in their commemorations. They displayed sugar figurines to acknowledge the presence of sugar and how it commonly paved the road to death in their lives.

In the Caribbean, losses were even more shocking. The Spanish drove slaves with endless work and brought about the obliteration of everyone—all Indigenous people. With no one to work the fields, the Spanish eventually imported African slaves, creating yet another population of oppressed people. In the eighteenth century, the importation of Africans led to burgeoning mestizo and interracial communities that the *casta* system (*el sistema de casta*), an elaborate hierarchy of racial identities, was designed to document and control.

If they could speak, sugar figurines from the Spanish colonial period would tell a dark, complex story about sugar and the overwhelming commonality of death in the Americas following the conquest. One can only imagine that the sugar figurines Native peoples made to commemorate death must have appeared as a terrible memento

mori of sugar production and the abuse and death they faced every day. In popular culture in the U.S. and Mexico, there is little or no mention of the death of millions of Indigenous people in New Spain—on the order of five times the number of people who died in the Holocaust of World War II.

It follows that in the contemporary use of sugar to make skulls, skeletons, caskets, and assorted Day of the Dead toys, there is a throughline of historical connection between death and sugar “hidden” in plain sight. The current plentiful presence of sugar during this holiday is a powerful, if disguised, message from the past. That story is continually retold in Day of the Dead practices for all who care to listen.

ROBERT CON DAVIS-UNDIANO is Neustadt Professor and Presidential Professor at the University of Oklahoma. He discusses Day of the Dead in a broad cultural context in the U.S. and Mexico in his award-winning book *Mestizos Come Home! Making and Claiming Mexican American Identity* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2017).

**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- *What is Day of the Dead?* Short video from *National Geographic* on the traditions and customs of celebrations across Latin America. [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/search?q=what+is+day+of+the+dead+national+geographic) (search: what is day of the dead national geographic)
- *Halloween and Día de Muertos Resources*, Library of Congress. Weblinks to podcasts, scary stories, songs, art, and photos celebrating these harvest-time holidays. [guides.loc.gov/halloween](https://guides.loc.gov/halloween)
- “Sweets, Slavery and Sculptures: A Brief History of Sugar in Art,” Tasha Marks, July 14, 2020, Art UK. Text and images chronicle our taste for sugar and the industry built on slave labor. [artuk.org](https://artuk.org)



# The Kept and The Killed

The project to photograph Depression-era America, and the man whose actions created an enduring void

ERICA X EISEN | IMAGES COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**B**egun as part of the alphabet soup of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) had been tasked with resettling struggling farmers onto more fertile ground, providing education about agricultural science, and giving loans for the purchase of land, feed, and livestock. Arguably its most enduring legacy today, however, is the hundreds of thousands of photographs the agency produced to document the plight of destitute farmers, many of whom were trapped in an inescapable pit of debt made deeper still by the environmental devastation of the Dust Bowl.

Rehabilitation client, Boone County, AR; photo by Ben Shahn, Oct. 1935.



1



2

1. Children of rehabilitation clients enjoying lollipops, Jackson County, OH; photo by Theodor Jung, April 1936.
2. At the track; unknown photographer, 1935-1942.
3. Young Native mother and baby at blueberry camp, near Little Fork, MN; photo by Russell Lee, Aug. 1937.



3

The project's head, Roy Emerson Stryker (1893–1975), would shop his favorites around, going from newsroom to newsroom “with pictures under his arm,” as Dorothea Lange would later recall, in an attempt to secure placements in major papers. Stryker had encyclopedic ambitions: Tasked with the mission of “introducing America to Americans,” the FSA’s photography wing would soon see its remit balloon far past images of rural poverty to encompass everything from aerial shots of utopian building projects to Kodachrome still lifes—all of which could find a home within what Stryker called simply the File.

Despite the File’s colossal scope, there were images that Stryker deemed unfit for inclusion. These photographs had to be, in his parlance, “killed”—marked for exclusion, usually with a merciless hole-punch through the middle. By the time the project came to a close, the FSA’s photographers had captured some 270,000 images, of which a staggering 100,000 were killed. These include work by pioneering Black filmmaker and photographer Gordon Parks; by Russell Lee, who would go on to document the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War; and by Marion Post Wolcott, the FSA’s first full-time female photographer. They also include images of which not even a punctured trace survives. Stryker only used the hole-punch method on 35mm negatives; when presented with sheet film he felt was unsuitable, he simply discarded it.



Stryker’s career had a ping-pong trajectory: he dropped out of the Colorado School of Mines to become a rancher before being shipped off to fight in World War I, then returned and studied economics at Columbia. There, he researched utopian socialism with Rexford Tugwell, whose emphasis on the pedagogical and psychological impact of visual aids left an impression on Stryker. After Tugwell became part of Roosevelt’s “Brain Trust” of key advisers, he called upon his former student to join him in Washington and head up the photography arm of the Resettlement Administration, which, in 1937, was folded into the Farm Security Administration.

Though not a photographer himself, Stryker nevertheless had a clearly defined sense of the medium as an instrument of social action and knew what he liked and did not like in an image. He would often send his photographers into the field armed with pages-long scripts detailing what exactly he wanted them to capture, itemized lists that sometimes approached aphoristic form: “The baseball diamond as an important part of our general landscape”; “Pressed clothes”; “The wall decorations in homes as an index to the different income groups and their reactions”; “Old tires piles”; “(What will happen to

the roadside hamburger stand?); “Pictures of men, women, and children who appear as if they really believed in the U.S.” (Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935–1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs*, New York Graphic Society, 1973).

Stryker’s editorial philosophy occasionally brought him into conflict with the photographers he employed. His refusal to use the captions Lange painstakingly composed for her own images greatly frustrated her. (Despite praising Migrant Mother as the pinnacle of the FSA photography program’s output, Stryker would fire Lange on three separate occasions). Photographer Edwin Rosskam remarked bitterly that Stryker’s hole-punching habit “was barbaric to me. . . . I’m sure that some very significant pictures have in that way been killed off, because there is no way of telling, no way, what photograph would come alive when.” Another FSA staffer, Ben Shahn, referred to Stryker’s style as a bit dictatorial:

He ruined quite a number of my pictures. . . . Some of them were incredibly valuable. He didn’t understand at the time. . . . Later on, during the war . . . I went to look for [a] negative and he[d] punched a hole through it. Well, I shot my mouth off about that. But, I didn’t know what was done with a lot of my negatives, naturally. He learned, then, not to do that, you see, because this was an invaluable document of what life was like in 1935 and when I was looking for it in 1943 or ’44 it didn’t exist anymore.

A chastened Stryker eventually granted veto power to photographers over which of their images would be killed.



By the time he took a job at the Pittsburgh Photography Library in the 1950s, Stryker had transitioned to indicating killed negatives by having them pasted onto cards marked with an incongruously cutesy blue star. Sometimes, however, the old temptation for more abrasive methods seemed to take hold—other cards were branded by a special KILL stamp. In still other cases the destroying angel seems to have taken Stryker over completely and caused him to slash across the doomed images in marker. Even those pictures that he favored were not immune from these kinds of interventions: squiggles, lines, and written notes instructed his employees to crop and straighten, addenda that sometimes smudged and marred the photo Stryker was trying to perfect.

Most of the negatives Stryker killed, by all accounts, were redundancies nixed in favor of a similar image with stronger composition, clearer focus, and facial expressions better



4. Among the sticks and stones of a cotton field, near Raleigh, NC; photo by Carl Mydans, March 1938. 5. Farm Security Administration photographers (left to right) John Vachon, Arthur Rothstein, and Russell Lee with Roy Stryker (right) reviewing photographs; photo by Beaumont Newhall, 1937-1944. 6. Roy Stryker and photographer Arthur Rothstein visiting Tennessee Valley Authority projects in 1942.





7. Goggles, gloves, and a guarded look; unknown photographer, 1935-1942. 8. Policeman directing traffic, Greensboro, NC; photo by John Vachon, April 1938. 9. An Arkansas sharecropper's family; photo by Arthur Rothstein, Aug. 1935.



comporting with the themes of suffering and endurance he sought to draw out of the FSA's subjects. Shot through, these unloved alternates have become almost more interesting than their perfect twins. In contrast to the carefully captioned File images, killed negatives have no names attached, often no notes on provenance. What little we know about them is only by analogy to those photos that were saved, clues about location gleaned from landscapes, clothing, faces. As such, the killed photos demand a more active viewer, one willing to piece together, to parse, to consign some things to the realm of the curious and unknowable.

Did Stryker give much thought as to where to put the hole through when he made his killings? These voids obliterate the hand of a little boy in fringed gloves who stares back calmly at his shooter; they slice through the pavement of an unnamed street where a pair of identical twins walks on unawares. They run like a sniper's bullet through the legs of a man bending over to pick a fruit, whizz past the ear of a cop. A black hole tarnishes the pale lapel of a floppy-bonneted woman as she looks the other way; it hovers over a man's head like a grim fate narrowly avoided. In one rare example, a vicious flurry of perforations strafes an entire family of Arkansas sharecroppers as the mother tends to her youngest. The void slates houses for destruction, theaters, water pumps, a cotton bale straining at the corset of its ties. It hangs aloft and lightless over a Chocowinity field like a sun negated. The same person is killed and killed again, from one picture to the next.

When one views these photos as a series, the holes begin to feel like a vengeful god too terrible to figure. Once capturing social history, these images now seem to conjure that moment just prior to disaster.



Punning on the pinhole history of early photographic technologies like the camera obscura, Roland Barthes used the word punctum (literally, "sting, speck, cut, little hole") to name the disarming effect of certain images. "A photograph's punctum," he wrote, "is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." In the killed negatives, we find Barthes' dictum literalized: it is the little hole or holes themselves that arrest our eyes and imagination.

The strange contradiction at the heart of the killed negatives is that in an important sense they weren't killed: the hole-punched photos remain in the Library of Congress, preserved by Stryker himself, and the Pittsburgh Photography Library images deemed unfit for the archives have instead come to comprise their own separate archive in the same building, a sort of Salon des Refusés.



Transients building a bridge, Prince George's County, MD; photo by Carl Mydans, Nov. 1935.

Allen Benson writes that the “entombment” of these images “produces a contradictory effect, a desire to look, to open the killed storage boxes and inspect the remains.” When we do look, we find that, whatever the organic center of the original photo’s gravity may be, the void has usurped it and become, suddenly, the focal point. In the subtle but unmistakable way that Stryker’s puncture marks reveal the three-dimensional negative from which each two-dimensional image is printed, they call our attention to the fact that a photograph is a physical object and a fragile one at that.

And yet at the same time it’s difficult not to feel a visceral reel as a hole slices through the head of a child, the face of a young mother. Stryker’s rejects present us with a push-pull of mimesis: the scenes become less real even as they become more emotionally immediate.



If we wish to examine what images Stryker thought ultimately worthy of keeping, we must also consider the question of what images he thought were worth taking in the first place. Groups like Latinos and Native Americans, for instance, are underrepresented in the File. In a 1937 letter to Lange while she was on assignment photographing tenant farmers in Texas, Stryker advised her to “take both black and white, but place the emphasis on the white tenants, since we know that these will receive

When one views these photos as a series, the holes begin to feel like a vengeful god too terrible to figure.

much wider use.” That latter part was indeed borne out by the fact that exhibitions and newspapers more readily selected white images from the File than non-white.

More broadly, the FSA’s focus on the madonna, the stoic striver, elevated a certain class of “deserving poor” above those who were beyond the bounds both of being photographed and receiving material aid. For the government, of course, these two things were tightly interwoven: the purpose of the FSA’s photography program, after all, was to drum up support for the New Deal among an American public that had long viewed poverty as a moral stain. In the course of resettling white tenant farmers in the Mississippi Delta, the FSA forcibly uprooted Black families throughout the region—families whose suffering, it appears, did not rate high enough to make it into the File.

Stryker’s negatives together seemed to be posing questions not just about the work of the FSA but about the future of the country they sought to document: both “Who should get a farm loan?” and “Who cuts a heroic enough figure to advertise them?” Not only “Whose grief do we recognize?” but also “Whose grief is deserving of succor?” Who will be kept and who will be killed? Who will survive in America—and what image of this land will these survivors bear into the future?

ERICA X EISEN is an editor at *Hypocrite Reader* and *The Public Domain Review*. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Baffler*, *The Boston Review*, and elsewhere. Awards for her writing include selection as a Best American Essays Notable Essay. This article is edited and was originally published in *The Public Domain Review* under a Creative Commons CC-BY-SA 3.0 license. Read more online at: [publicdomainreview.org](http://publicdomainreview.org)

**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- *Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives Collection*, Library of Congress website. Describes assembly of the archive in a brief overview of Roy Stryker and FSA photographers, with links to view both “kept” and “killed” images. Includes videos and research tips. [bit.ly/3OMAG01](http://bit.ly/3OMAG01)
- *Roy Stryker: Photography, The FSA and The Great Depression*, Farm Security Administration. Video on Roy Stryker and his work to produce, collect, and publicize the FSA photo collection. [bit.ly/3OQFjq1](http://bit.ly/3OQFjq1)

# KILLING THE NEGATIVE: POETIC INTERVENTIONS



Art by Joel Daniel Phillips

## early in late spring

mama vines my hair like fickle fruit  
fightin for air in this ashy dirt. when  
livin, leaves are stinky feathers

if worms leave them be. tied to stakes  
in a jesus way, root and crown growin  
up and out. past april unkind to rebirth

see it in daddy's eyes, half empty  
baskets. my eyes heavy as ample  
harvest, this easter dress my room.

sun just now awake, i water  
and water, praying salt from skin  
don't kill our supper table. mama

hammers morning hymns. the soil  
hard-headed from time to time. she  
asks zion to tend our garden plump.

—Quraysh Ali Lansana

Inspired by the photographic archive of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) held by the Library of Congress, artist Joel Daniel Phillips and writer Quraysh Ali Lansana give voice to images destined never to be seen. In the Great Depression era and leading up to WWII, Roy Stryker, director of the FSA's Historical Section, sent photographers across the country to document hardships, then excluded many images from print by hole-punching the negatives. In response to these "killed" negatives, Phillips and Lansana fill these gaps with art and poetry.

"For me," says Phillips, "Stryker's editing called into question the veracity of the historical record. When translated into large-scale, immersive graphite drawings (and later paintings), the physical subtraction created by the hole-punch became a visual *addition*. The circular void destroyed the original image even as it created an entirely new one."


Lansana was struck that the identities of those photographed are mostly unknown. He proposed a collaboration to Phillips, whereby his poems would imagine the stories of those photographed. "The poems respond to the echoes," says Lansana, "weaving words to fill the vacant space, confronting our notions of power, representation, and who shapes America's historical narratives."

A volume of Phillips' artwork and Lansana's poems, including works by other notable poets in America, is forthcoming this fall from Left Field Books. A traveling exhibition by the Mid-America Arts Alliance is slated for Spring 2026.

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JOEL DANIEL PHILLIPS is an American artist whose portraits examine truth, power, and our collective historical amnesia. Phillips believes that portraiture can build emotional bridges across time and individual experience. His work has been shown across the United States and was selected for the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. [joeldanielphillips.com](http://joeldanielphillips.com)

QURAYSH ALI LANSANA is author of fourteen books of poetry, nonfiction, and children's literature, and is editor of nine literary anthologies. An Emmy Award and duPont-Columbia Award winning journalist, Lansana is Executive Producer of KOSU/NPR's monthly program *Focus: Black Oklahoma* and is Visiting Associate Professor in Creative Writing at The University of Tulsa. [qalansana.com](http://qalansana.com)



# SHAPING CULTURAL MEMORY

Full representation requires context and inclusion.

SARAH MILLIGAN

AS A FOLKLORIST AND ORAL HISTORIAN, stories are a big part of my life. Growing up in southeastern Oklahoma, I witnessed a generational lament for loss of knowledge as the number of living family and friends dwindled. My dad shared stories of the heyday of Decoration Day at the Cupco Cemetery in Latimer County, when tables of food stretched across the entire Cupco Church lawn and waves of kin came home to decorate family graves and visit. By my teens, the tables were fewer and the visitors older—a tradition

not quite dying but diminishing. The stories were changing and I wondered, *Who makes sure there is a record of how my dad remembers Decoration Day when he was a kid?*

I found my answer while thinking about graduate school, when I stumbled across the field of folklore. I began studying how to document traditions, including recording oral history interviews in partnership with archives who make sure stories are available and easily accessible for future generations.



LEFT: A miniaturized visualization of items in the collections of The New York Public Library. In 2016, NYPL gave worldwide access to over 187,000 digital images in the public domain. Clicking any square of the interactive webpage ([publicdomain.nypl.org/pd-visualization](http://publicdomain.nypl.org/pd-visualization)), will lead you to multiple stories and perspectives. Even without the ambitious resources of NYPL, countless museums, archives, and libraries are working to better contextualize their collections by collaborating with local representative communities, resulting in more inclusive narratives. Image: A public domain remix, Brian Foo, New York Public Library Labs

I learned that objects and stories don't magically appear in museums and archives. Many individuals play a role in the process: Creators and contributors write diaries, save correspondence, keep and label photographs, and record interviews. Donors share those materials. Conservators restore and stabilize collections. Archivists and librarians organize and contextualize them. Curators research and write exhibition text. For almost twenty years I have been privileged to be a part of this work.

#### COLLECTING AND CRAFTING THE STORY

Cultural heritage organizations that champion and save history are integral to sharing and understanding the human experience and helping people connect with it. But while we acknowledge the importance of these organizations in reflecting our societal past, we also have a responsibility to take them off lofty pedestals and understand how representation within these spaces has shaped inclusion and exclusion in our cultural knowledge.

Researchers of the past learn the value of primary sources in understanding the shapes, sounds, and voices of a place. The ingrained assumption is that if something was important enough to big "H" history, it will have a footprint among primary sources: Letters between loved ones, images of smiling people, newspaper accounts, journal entries, or even recorded oral interviews all help triangulate evidence to shape a story of our past. In addition to these physical and recorded artifacts, archival and museum collections are the cumulative reflection of the people cataloguing and working with the information gathered and presented, and their individual choices, preferences, interests, and even biases. As researchers and visitors, we experience the ramifications of their decisions whether we recognize it or not.

Asking important questions illustrates the subtleties of public memory: Who created the institution? For whom and what purpose was it founded and how has that mission held or changed over time? Who decided what to

collect and how to catalogue those items for the public? Is the cultural lens of collection managers a century ago still relevant to us today? How does the language used to describe the material influence how we interact with it? Does a comparative lack of information for some objects make them appear less important or relevant?

In other words, who shaped the story told by museums and archives? And whose stories are intentionally or unintentionally missing?

#### INSIDER KNOWLEDGE VS. OUTSIDER OBSERVATIONS

Today, many cultural heritage institutions are making deliberate strides to demystify their collecting and address past bias or false representation in their presentation of objects. Efforts include inviting communities included in their collections to provide missing stories instead of relying on outsiders to provide narrative.

For example, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History—with over 1.8 million objects in its holdings, and part of the larger Smithsonian complex dating back more than 175 years—makes this statement, "About the Online Collection," on their website:

Cataloging a collection of this scale is and always will be a work in progress. . . . You may even occasionally find an error, or harmful historical imagery, or language that we should explain further. . . . As we catalog and digitize the collection, we strive to: accurately describe objects and documents and place them in their historical context(s); capture and convey the stories that led us to collect these materials; . . . adhere to cultural and ethical guidelines related to sensitive materials; and respect access or use conditions set by creators or donors of objects and documents. We welcome your help in making our collection better. If you believe that information in our online database misrepresents or violates the rights of a person or community, please let us know.



### ACCURATELY FRAMING THE FACTS

Contextualizing collections is another priority for many organizations like the Library of Congress. During the 1930s, a few dozen largely white-presenting individuals traveled across seventeen states, including Oklahoma, to gather over 2,300 first-person accounts of slavery. This collection of primarily handwritten transcripts (the Works Progress Administration's *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project*) is legendary in its uniqueness and volume. The glimpse we gain into the lives of formerly, legally enslaved individuals in our country is irreplaceable.

And yet, one cannot consider this series of accounts outside of the context in which they were created. The Library of Congress provides a framework of scholarly essays to point out the shortcomings of writer-interviewers and interview subjects. The introduction, "The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection" notes:

It is probable that the interviewer's race affected an informant's response. . . . [T]he staffs of the Writers' Projects in the states in which former slaves were interviewed were overwhelmingly white. The relative absence of black interviewers introduced an important source of bias, for the interviewer's race was a significant factor in eliciting responses from the former slaves. The etiquette of Southern race relations influenced the definition of the interview situation for

these aged African Americans, and some of their interviewers were even members of the former slaveholding families. As a result, informants may frequently have told their white interviewers "what they wanted to hear." For similar reasons many were undoubtedly less than fully candid or refused to tell a complete story, resulting in a kind of self-censorship.

Acknowledging the potential bias affecting both sides of the interview process doesn't mean the narratives aren't valuable in our understanding of this horrific era of our country's past. Considering the collection in the context of its creation and curation helps us better appreciate the complexity of representation.

### CULTIVATING TRUTH AND TRUST

How is public memory affected when objects are not represented in cultural heritage institutions? What if local narratives are not widely known in larger society?

The history of how the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre was publicly reported, represented, and framed over time demonstrates that positions of power impact representation. The mass violence was horrific: For more than twelve hours, a mob of several thousand white citizens and authorities murdered residents and destroyed businesses and homes in Tulsa's segregated Greenwood District. In the immediate aftermath, a divide in public language along racial lines shaped the event. The June 1, 1921, headline of *The Morning Tulsa Daily World* newspaper declared, "Two

This museum is working to not only place objects in more accurate historic contexts but also invites the general public to share knowledge related to the objects' stories. While it may take decades to accomplish for a collection this size, the effort and inclusion is key to developing a more accurate understanding of these representations of history, as well as building trust with communities.

Other institutions, like my own at Oklahoma State University Library, are inviting collaborations on new projects and platforms. We recently worked with the alumni association of the Chilocco Indian Agricultural School, a historic Native American boarding school located in north-central Oklahoma, to digitize photographs, conduct oral histories with former students, and develop an online database. We intentionally worked to lead not with *our* assumptions, but rather facilitated space for the alumni organization to shape the story *they* had experienced and wanted to tell.

Whites Dead in Race Riot,” with a second extra edition headlining, “Many More Whites Are Shot.” By contrast, a headline for the June 3, 1921, issue of Oklahoma City’s *The Black Dispatch* announced, “\$2,500,000 of Negro Property is Destroyed.”

Why does the framing of this event from two influential Oklahoma news sources differ so much? By excluding or decentering the Greenwood community, *The Morning Tulsa Daily World* controlled public perception of the facts. Other news sources like *The Black Dispatch* worked to counter the dismissive rhetoric.

Power and lack of trust also shaped why the event was not widely known nor survivor recollections shared in later years. When describing the generational silence in the 2001 *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921*, State Representative Don Ross, a product of the Greenwood neighborhood, recounted a conversation with one of his high school history teachers:

The riot isn’t known much by young teachers. Many were born after the riot and book publishers banned it, as much as U.S. history about blacks and slavery. I could teach a course on just what has been left out of history. . . . Blacks lost everything. They were afraid it could happen again and there was no way to tell the story. The two Negro daily newspapers were bombed. . . . The killers were still running loose and they’re wearing blue suits as well as Klan sheets.

This “missing history” wasn’t widely acknowledged or understood until the creation of the 2001 Tulsa Race Riot Commission. The work of individuals such as historian Eddie Faye Gates to identify existing evidence and create new primary sources representing the perspectives of victims provided the public with more accurate memories of this historic event and its continuing generational impact. It wasn’t that this evidence didn’t exist widely, it was that the relationships and trust between communities and formal archives and museums did not. This wasn’t going to happen through passive collecting, only through intentional efforts, cultivating trust for how the objects and stories would be cared for and presented, so that people felt safe sharing them in wider spaces.

Even the vernacular name of the event, long referred to as a “riot,” was a signal of power structure. It wasn’t until recently that historians and advocates, through organizations like the Greenwood Cultural Center, pushed for a public adoption of the community’s term “massacre” that more accurately represented the legacy of those victimized. Through this collective insistence on preferred terminology, titles and references have been changed in museums, archives, and libraries, as well as in public nomenclature.

#### EMPOWERING EVERY VOICE

The idea that a museum or historical society is a tower of knowledge is outdated. What does that mean for the way we look at who we are as individuals, families, and communities?

I challenge you to stay curious. It’s okay to ask questions. If you don’t see yourself or your community reflected, ask why and consider where there is a space in which you feel safe sharing your story or helping others tell theirs, perhaps by recording interviews.

If we have learned nothing else from the long history of collecting objects to reflect our past, it might be that everyone has a role. Representation matters in these history-saving spaces. When we empower everyone to shape their own story, when we gather these narratives and objects with a conscious eye for who and what is missing, the result is more than a collection to be visited. It is a living cultural trust through which we remember and better understand the stories of *us*.

SARAH MILLIGAN is a Professor and Head of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) at the Oklahoma State University Library. She holds the Hyle Family Endowed Professorship and oversees the production, access, and preservation of the 2,000+ interviews in the OOHRP collection. She has worked extensively in oral history outreach, including providing training for new interview production as well as technical assistance to oral history collection holders throughout the country.

#### **EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- Chilocco History Project, Oklahoma State University. Former students’ perspectives of historic Native boarding school. Browse interviews, photographs, a documentary, and more. [chilocco.library.okstate.edu](http://chilocco.library.okstate.edu)
- “Monolithic Museum Collections Are Like Climate Change—They Will Take Generations to Undo, But We Must Start Now,” Naomi Beckwith, Dec. 15, 2022, *The Burns Halperin Report*. Discusses the long road to achieving equity. [news.artnet.com](https://news.artnet.com)



# AUGUSTA METCALFE

## A WOMAN OF THE WEST

JOHN GIFFORD

*Moving to Hamburg*, Augusta Metcalfe, oil, 1960. Photo by John Gifford with permission of Break O' Day Farm and Metcalfe Museum.



Indian Territory (Antelope Hills highlighted in blue). Oklahoma Historical Society

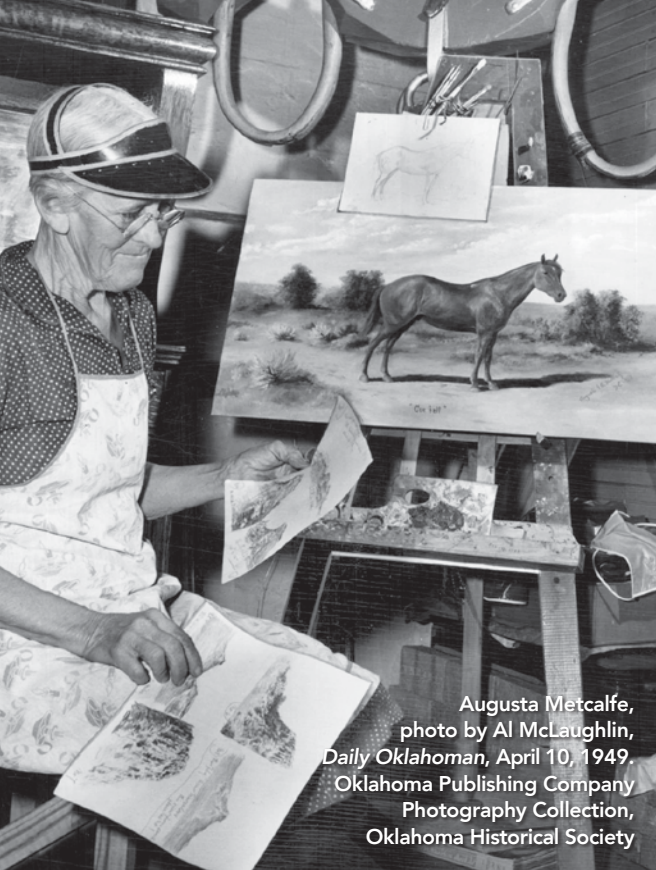


**A**s the sun slowly ascended, I peered through my camera's viewfinder.

I arrived on site in Roger Mills County an hour before sunrise, but already I could see the faint outline of the Antelope Hills in the distance. A pack of coyotes yipped and howled. Wild turkeys gobbled. Stars sparkled and the Milky Way stretched across the heavens—sights that, given light pollution, are unavailable to most Americans but which people in rural western Oklahoma have viewed since time immemorial.

When I stood back from the camera a few moments later, the field around me was bathed in warm sunlight and grass sparrows began to sing. I'd always wanted to photograph this place. It was vital to help me better understand the artist whose work I'd come to study—Oklahoma's own "Sagebrush Artist," Augusta Metcalfe, known for her realistic depictions of western Oklahoma and daily life on the frontier.

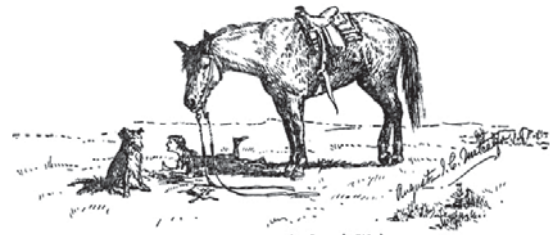
It was through the 1963 documentary *Pioneer Painter*, produced by Oklahoma City's WKY-TV, that I was introduced to Metcalfe. It's the kind of film I might have enjoyed as a child attending Norman Public Schools in the 1970s, losing myself in Virgil Dominic's distinctive narration, the midcentury sound effects, and scenes of then-octogenarian Augusta Metcalfe riding horseback on her ranch as a dog ran alongside. We see her sitting in a field, glancing up at the Antelope Hills, then quickly sketching as the Oklahoma wind stirs the surrounding prairie grasses. These hills figured into many of her paintings and were a source of inspiration that she returned to again and again.



Augusta Metcalfe,  
photo by Al McLaughlin,  
*Daily Oklahoman*, April 10, 1949.  
Oklahoma Publishing Company  
Photography Collection,  
Oklahoma Historical Society



Antelope Hills, Oklahoma,  
photo by John Gifford



Augusta Isabella Corson was born in Vermillion, Kansas, 1881, and moved with her parents and three siblings five years later to “No Man’s Land,” now the Oklahoma Panhandle. In 1893, after the U.S. government opened Cheyenne and Arapaho lands for homesteading, the Corson family claimed a parcel on the Washita River, lured by the area’s lush grasslands and opportunities for ranching. Their family’s first home was a crude structure Metcalfe referred to as a “picket house” constructed of logs with a dirt roof and floor.

The Antelope Hills became a landmark for Augusta just as they had for others who’d visited this rugged landscape before her. Spanish explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado camped here in 1541. René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, claimed the land for France in 1682. Prior to the American Civil War, the area was part of the Comancheria, a vast region occupied by the Comanches. Countless travelers marked the Antelope Hills on journeys to the California gold fields or the markets of Santa Fe.

Augusta thrived in her new home and loved spending time with her older brother Howard who taught her to ride and tend cattle on the open range. By the time she was a teenager, they rounded up cattle as hired hands to make extra money. Sadly, the partnership was short-lived. Suffering from a lung ailment, Howard sought treatment with a specialist out of state. He told his mother that if he did not return to give his horse to “the kid.” Soon thereafter, Augusta inherited Howard’s prized pony. Managing the cattle fell to her and she passed hours in the saddle each day, working to keep the family herd separate from free-ranging cattle that grazed the open countryside. Summer days were often so hot that the cattle would stand nearly motionless, as if stunned by the heat. At such times, Augusta would climb down and lie on the grassy prairie in the thin shade her horse provided. “It wasn’t lonesome for me,” she recounted years later. “I had little Don, my collie dog, and Dick, my saddle horse.”

Throughout her life Augusta recalled those pleasant times tending cattle on the open range, referring to this period as “the good old days,” a feeling reflected in one of her early drawings titled *Lying in the Shade of Dick*, a scene of peace and contentment and, for Augusta, purpose.

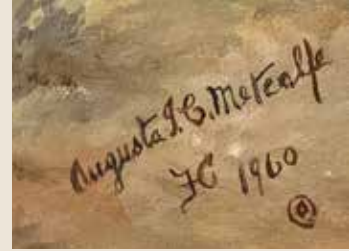


Augusta never had formal art training outside of critiques from her maternal uncle George Davidson, a professor in San Francisco. His mentorship helped the young artist master subjects, especially horses, which fascinated her. She once put her skills to use for a debate to be held at the local schoolhouse. The question for discussion: “Which was the most benefit to man, the cow or the horse?” Augusta had a strong opinion and was determined to make her case. On the afternoon of the debate, after the teacher and children had gone home for the day, she went to the school and drew a picture on the blackboard. Though she didn’t attend the “literary,” her drawing helped persuade those who did. The horse won. A few days later, a party from the “cow side” noted: “You played thunder drawing that picture on the blackboard!”

Augusta married James Metcalf in 1905 and they had a son, Howard. In 1908, James abandoned the family, leaving Augusta to care for her child, invalid mother, and the ranch. The young woman rose to the challenge and continued operations herself—roping, branding, herding, and planting—well enough to remain in business. She added an “e” to the end of her name to distinguish herself from the man who left her and never married again.

Horses, cattle, and the raw open landscape of the American West were not just a daily reality for Augusta, it was who she was and a life she explored through her art. Her compulsion to draw and paint the scenes around her would make her famous. She won two first-place prizes at the inaugural Oklahoma State Fair. *The Daily Oklahoman* declared her a “developing Oklahoma genius” with work “more truthful in reproduction and coloring than some of the Remingtons.” She exhibited selections at women’s clubs and donated pieces to the Red Cross to raise funds during the First and Second World Wars. She won at the Amarillo Tri-State Fairs in 1948, 1951, and 1952, and gained a national audience in 1950 when *Life* magazine featured her art.

Her work was shown as far away as New York City, and close to home in publications like *Oklahoma Today* and *Oklahoma Poetry*. Three years before her death in 1968, she was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. In 1983, she was introduced into the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall



## BREAK O’ DAY FARM & METCALFE MUSEUM

Four hours west of Oklahoma City, the Break O’ Day Farm and Metcalfe Museum celebrates the life and career of Augusta Metcalfe, Oklahoma’s Sagebrush Artist. As the original Corson-Metcalfe homestead, the 640-acre property includes a museum, several outbuildings, and the home (built by her son, Howard, upon his return from WWII) where Metcalfe spent her final years.

Visitors can see Metcalfe’s original paintings and drawings, tour her studio, and view rotating works by other regional artists. Of note in Metcalfe’s art is her signature, which often incorporated the Corson ranching brand, reflecting how she valued the land, family, and the life they built. The backward-facing E acknowledges her father, Edward; the H, her brother Howard; and the C, the Corson surname.

While you are there, take time to experience Metcalfe’s ultimate outdoor studio—the Antelope Hills and surrounding prairie that were her wellspring of inspiration. The property is recognized by the Oklahoma Natural Areas Registry for the protection of mixed grass prairie, shinnery oak mottes, and Texas horned lizard, and as a Registered Natural Heritage Area.

The Break O’ Day Farm has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places by the Oklahoma Historical Society since 2005. It is still a gathering place for the community, fostering art at the local level through camps, competitions, and an annual scholarship for a student majoring or minoring in art.

Visit this unique museum March 1 through November 30 (closed July 4 and Thanksgiving), Tuesday-Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (arrive by 4:00 p.m. for a guided tour). Admission is free. 8647 N. 1745 Rd. | Durham, OK (580) 655-4467 | metcalfemuseum.org

Sketches: (ABOVE LEFT) *Lying in the Shade of Dick* by Augusta Metcalfe. (ABOVE RIGHT) *Tom and Jerry* by Augusta Metcalfe. From “My Life in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma: The Story of Augusta Corson Metcalf” by Melvin Harrel, *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Spring 1955.



*The Shaw Round Up*, Augusta Metcalfe; Oklahoma Arts Council Collection. Image courtesy of the Oklahoma Arts Council.

of Fame, which proclaimed her “a child of the true West” and “one of the greatest Western painters.” Her work is widely collected and has been exhibited at galleries, museums, and the Oklahoma State Capitol.

Metcalfe’s art remains important because her story is Oklahoma’s story.



As I drove the dirt roads toward the Metcalfe Ranch, near Durham, which now houses the Metcalfe Museum, I passed herds of free-ranging cattle, browsing deer, and a jackrabbit. Roadrunners, fascinating birds synonymous with the American Southwest, lived up to their name, darting across the dirt tracks ahead of me.

The Antelope Hills once marked the international boundary between the United States and Mexico, and for this reason were sometimes referred to as the “Boundary Mounds.” I cannot know what they represented to Augusta, but they seem to me less boundary or border, and more of an enduring symbol of the

resilience and ingenuity it takes to make a home here. What impressed me is how remote and vast and sparsely populated these lands are. I saw or heard no other human for more than two hours.

The sky here is enormous, visible from horizon to horizon, because these wonderful grasslands are mostly devoid of trees. Consequently, one can see and breathe. I was at peace in these expansive fields under the big, blue Oklahoma sky, knowing that Augusta Metcalfe once gazed upon these very same scenes.

JOHN GIFFORD is a writer and photographer whose work explores our relationship with the natural world. His books include *Red Dirt Country: Field Notes and Essays on Nature*; *Pecan America: Exploring a Cultural Icon*; and a forthcoming title, *Landscaping for Wildlife*.

**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- *Pioneer Painter* (1968), WKY-TV Film Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society. The documentary, mentioned above, profiles Metcalfe sketching and working on her ranch. [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)
- Break O’ Day Farm & Metcalfe Museum. Info about the preservation of the original homestead, with photos of Metcalfe and her art. [metcalfemuseum.org](https://www.metcalfemuseum.org)

Sketch: *One of the Neighbors in 1892*, by Augusta Metcalfe. From “My Life in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma: The Story of Augusta Corson Metcalf” by Melvin Harrel, *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Spring 1955.





Photo by Stanley Staniski

# A Republic of the Imagination

*In Conversation with Azar Nafisi*

DANIEL SIMON

*Fiction, storytelling, is the bearer, the carrier of empathy.*

With her latest book of essays, *Read Dangerously: The Subversive Power of Literature in Troubled Times* (Dey Street Books, 2022), Iranian American writer Azar Nafisi offers a “resistance reading list” that the *Washington Post* hails as offering “a new canon for the tyrannies of the present and the dystopian possibilities of the future.” Over Zoom, we discussed the power of storytelling embodied by Scheherazade and Alice in Wonderland; the intergenerational threads that connect readers; and the role of writers and readers in preserving memory and defending truth.

**DANIEL SIMON:** We're talking today about your newest book, *Read Dangerously*, which I really love—thank you so much for writing it. It's an opportune moment to speak with you about your own passion for reading, writing, and books and how they've played such a large part in your life. In the epistolary genre consisting of letters to "Baba," your late father, you write beautifully in *Read Dangerously* about the intergenerational thread that connects teachers and readers, such as your parents, Nezhat and Ahmad, to your own children and now your grandchildren; Professor James Yoch here at the University of Oklahoma and your student Raziieh in Tehran; even your own reading of writers from Plato to James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Atwood during the 1970s and then again more recently as you are composing these letters. If a student in Norman or Tehran were to ask you what it means to read dangerously in 2023, what would you tell them?

**AZAR NAFISI:** Well, this book is partly a response to the trend I had noticed, especially in the US, where we use books as comfort food. We read them not in order to be disturbed or find something new, but we read them in order for them to confirm what we already know, at times to confirm our prejudices: "Why don't they speak what I want them to?" So, there's no challenge—we're uncomfortable with challenge. We want to eliminate rather than create an exchange. And so, for me, reading dangerously means that we take that risk to read in order to be disturbed. As James Baldwin says, artists are here to disturb the peace. Writers are not here to warm the cockles of your heart.

For me, the best example of a good reader or a reader who takes risks is Alice in Wonderland. Out of millions of little girls, there's this one little girl who is bored with the routine of her life, and she's after something different. What makes Alice so exceptional is the fact that she has what Nabokov calls the third eye of the imagination. She sees not just reality in terms of appearances, but she also sees beyond reality, the magic of reality. And she sees not only a white rabbit but a white rabbit who

talks and wears a waistcoat and a watch. She runs after that white rabbit, not saying, like some of our readers, that this is not how rabbits act. She risks going into the world of the white rabbit. And when she jumps into that hole, she doesn't say, *Am I going to survive this? What's going to happen to me next?* And her reward, of course, is the world—everything, every creature in that world, has a sign of being in her real life, but she's now seeing them in a new light. Her vision of reality is changing as she goes from one person to another.

The last thing that I want to say about Alice, which I think is really important, is that like all good stories, it challenges and questions, not just the world outside but the reader as well. Alice has a lot of questions from these creatures, but every time she asks them about who they are or why are they like this, they ask the question of her, *Who are you? Why do you look like this? You look strange.* She tells the caterpillar, *Who are you?* And the caterpillar throws the question back to her, saying, *Who are you?* So, that is my concept of risking when we read. Writers take a risk when they write; the reader should also take a risk when they read.

**SIMON:** You write so beautifully about your father, his example of reading and writing dangerously, even when he was imprisoned. As an example for you, it sounds like that was quite an inspiration to create your own imaginations of alternate realities, and to encourage your students to do so as well.

**NAFISI:** Yes. My father, when he was in jail and he was in the prison library, he told me that he was not alone because he was surrounded by these books. And every time he opened a book, even a book that he disagreed with, he discovered something new.

**SIMON:** That makes me think of what you say about David Grossman in the book as well: recognizing the enemy in the mirror. And in this time of great inhumanity, recognizing the humanity of someone who may be threatening your very survival. I think that's so valuable to remember in these times.

I was also thinking about a conversation with Moniro Ravanipour that appeared in an issue of *World Literature Today* called “Writing Beyond Iran” in 2015. She remarks, “[The extremists] don’t want any change, and the writer, by virtue of her craft, tries to change things, change minds and perceptions.” In the conclusion to *Read Dangerously*, you also write that “where lies masquerade as truth, we need the clear eyes of imagination to see the reality behind and beyond the show.” Is there a writer you’ve read recently who expresses this imagination most compellingly for you?

**NAFISI:** Well, there are so many writers, it’s very difficult to choose. I always say that I’m promiscuous when it comes to books. Recently, I have been trying to organize and rearrange my bookshelves because every time I write a book, every room becomes filled with books and with notes. And then I have to go and find a place for them.

As I was doing that, I came across a book, in Persian actually, but it’s been translated into English, *The 1,001 Nights* stories. I’d like to talk about that frame story because I think it is the mother of all stories. When we talk about imagination and the healing role that imagination plays in our lives, we can go back to Scheherazade and *The 1,001 Nights*. If you remember the story, there’s this king who actually is a just king, but he discovers his queen making love to a slave and goes nuts. And without hearing the queen and the slave’s side of the story, he kills them. From then on, he decides because she was unfaithful, all women are unfaithful. So, every night he marries a virgin, and at dawn he kills her before she can betray him.

Then comes Scheherazade. Of course, all these heroines are beautiful, but Scheherazade is known not for her beauty but for her wisdom. And that makes a difference—wisdom as an attraction. She decides that she is going to save the virgins and herself. Now, the first thing that comes to one’s mind is taking a weapon to bed and killing him. What have you got to lose if he’s going to kill you? You kill him. But that is the whole idea behind

imagination: you don’t do what your enemy does, you don’t go into their domain. You’re probably not good in their domain anyway. So, every night she tells a story to her sister as the king is listening, and she leaves it unfinished so that the next morning the king wants to know more. And that’s another thing about imagination: it arouses our curiosity. We want to know, we want to go to places we have not been, meet people we have not seen.

Anyway, to make a long story short, she tells him stories for 1,001 nights. During this time, he changes because two things happen to him. One is the curiosity, wanting to know about others and discovering that not all queens are betrayers and not all kings are just. The second thing that happens to him is that he finds empathy. And fiction, storytelling, is the bearer, the carrier of empathy. We all talk about difference, but the shock of recognition that we all share a common humanity is very important. Scheherazade heals the king rather than killing the king. I think that this is a great description of what imagination does to us or should do to us.

AZAR NAFISI is the critically acclaimed author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a number-one *New York Times* bestseller published in thirty-two languages, and *Things I’ve Been Silent About*, also a *New York Times* bestseller. Her other books include *The Republic of Imagination* and *That Other World: Nabokov and the Puzzle of Exile*. She has taught at Oxford University, Johns Hopkins University, and several universities in Tehran. [azarnafisi.com](http://azarnafisi.com)

DANIEL SIMON is assistant director and editor in chief for *World Literature Today*. He is a poet, essayist, and translator, and his most recent edited collection, *Dispatches from the Republic of Letters: 50 Years of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature* (Deep Vellum, 2020), was nominated for a 2020 Foreword INDIES Award.

This interview is an excerpt from “A Republic of the Imagination” by Azar Nafisi. Copyright © 2023 by Azar Nafisi, originally published in the May/June 2023 issue of *World Literature Today*, used by permission of The Wylie Agency LLC.

# UNITED

## ★ WE STAND ★

### Connecting Through Culture

Oklahoma Humanities (OH) is proud to partner with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to combat hate and hate-motivated violence through their new initiative, "United We Stand: Connecting Through Culture." OH will support this important work on the local level through an expansion of OH-conducted programs and partner-led public events that will explore diverse themes and demonstrate the power of the arts and humanities to foster connections and understanding.

#### COUNCIL-CONDUCTED PROGRAMS

- Our dynamic book club *Let's Talk About It* will offer a curated collection of six reading and discussion themes in the spring of 2024, including two new themes developed specifically for this initiative by award-winning author Rilla Askew and Dr. Tracy Floreani, Director of Oklahoma City University's Jeanne Hoffman Smith Center for Film & Literature.
- OH will also develop a special page on our website that will include a comprehensive list of upcoming initiative events, online scholarly resources, and *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine articles that educate the public on the history of domestic extremism and hate-based violence while promoting civic engagement, information literacy, and social cohesion.

#### PARTNER-LED PUBLIC EVENTS

- The McBride Center for Public Humanities at the Oklahoma Christian University campus will host an event with bestselling non-fiction writer David Grann, author of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, in advance of Martin Scorsese's film adaptation that reveals the racial animus and greed behind the murder of Osage Nation citizens in the 1920s.

- The First Americans Museum (FAM) will launch a K-12 access project to educate Oklahoma public and tribal students on the history of Indigenous genocide and forced removal while increasing cross-cultural awareness and empathy for Native experiences.
- The Greenwood Rising History Center and the Greenwood Cultural Center will educate Oklahomans on the history of the hate-based, white supremacist-led Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 and its lasting impact on the city and its people.
- The City of Oklahoma City and the Oklahoma Black History Museum will collect oral histories related to central Oklahoma's All-Black Towns. The story of their disappearance is one of ongoing segregation, hostility, forced relocation, indifference, and violence.
- The Oklahoma Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR-OK) will launch an educational video presentation series and complementary digital toolkit that examines the history of Islamic culture and Islamophobia in Oklahoma. All resources and videos will be available for free online, and promoted on multiple statewide websites.

Visit [okhumanities.org](http://okhumanities.org) to learn more about this initiative and our related programming!

#### 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 institutes, 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.

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# NOTEWORTHY

## FROM THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

In 2018, shortly after I accepted a governor's appointment to serve as an Oklahoma Humanities Council Board Member, I attended my first Board meeting. A commitment to serve and invest in Oklahomans, companioned with gratitude and a little nervousness filled my being. It was my first time serving on a Board that served the entire state and the members held years of experience and knowledge. Everyone on the Board and staff, however, welcomed me with open arms and a willingness to guide me as I learned the culture and expectations of this powerful Board and organization.

For the past five years, I've had the privilege to be a part of this amazing team who works together with our varied skillsets to use the humanities (history, literature, ethics, and culture) to inspire fresh thinking, promote civic engagement, and strengthen our democracy. For the past few years, I've also had the pleasure to serve as Chair, diligently executing the OH mission: "to strengthen communities by helping Oklahomans learn about the human experience, understand new perspectives and participate knowledgeably in civic life." And now it is time to welcome a new Board Chair, Sarah Milligan.

Sarah currently serves as the Board's Vice-Chair and is Professor and Head of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) at the Oklahoma State University Library where she holds the Hyle Family Endowed Professorship and oversees the production, access, and preservation of the 2,000+ interviews in the OOHRP collection. She has worked extensively in oral history outreach and training and has served the Oral History Association (OHA) broadly. She is also a project lead for the Digital Public Library of America's OKHub and served as the inaugural president of the OK Archivists Association.

I will remain on the Board and look forward to continuing our work together. Please help me welcome and celebrate our new Board Chair, Sarah Milligan!

## MEET OUR NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Oklahoma Humanities is governed by a 24-member Board of Trustees, comprising private citizens, industry leaders, academic scholars, and governor's appointees—an expert team with a passion for ensuring educational and cultural

opportunities for all Oklahomans. "I'm honored to welcome four new members to our dedicated and engaged Board of Trustees," Executive Director Caroline Lowery stated. "We're grateful for the experience and leadership they bring."



**UZMA MUZAFFAR SALEEMI** is the founder and owner of U Designs LLC and holds a BA with honors in Graphic Design. She specializes in interior design and decor for businesses, residences, and events. Also a professionally trained artist, she works across media including pastels and ceramics. Whether small pieces, commissioned murals, or interior design, she loves the creative process and bringing joy to others through her work.



**LYNNE SCHONACHER**, born and raised in Kansas City, has lived in Oklahoma since 1994 and Oklahoma City since 2015. She is a reading tutor for elementary students and serves on the boards of several community, state, and national organizations. She and her husband, Bill, have four wonderful children, four wonderful in-law children, and two terrific granddaughters.



**STACY TAKACS** is Professor of English and American Studies at Oklahoma State University, with a specialization in film and television history. She is the author of two books, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (University Press of Kansas, 2012) and *Interrogating Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2014); co-editor of *American Militarism on the Small Screen* (Routledge, 2016); and co-editor of a new series from University Press of Kansas called "War on Screen."



**LAURA WATTS** is Senior Account Manager at *The Journal Record* and holds a BA in Counseling from Oklahoma Baptist University and an MPH from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences. She has served on several local Boards and volunteers for the Festival of the Arts, the Oklahoma City Memorial Marathon, and the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum's *Small Works Great Wonders* exhibition and sale.



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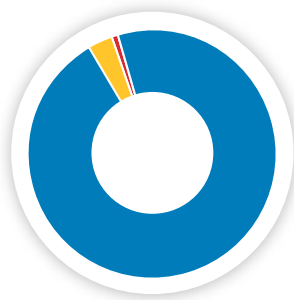
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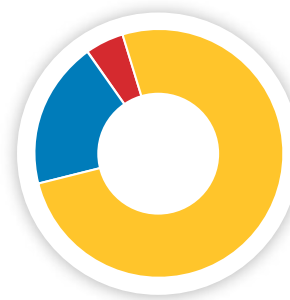
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**REVENUE: \$1,624,150**

- Federal, Foundation, & Corporate Support 96%
- Donor Support 3.5%
- Other Support 0.5%

Realized and unrealized gain/loss on investments: (\$237,002)



**EXPENSES: \$1,530,982**

- Programs 76%
- Administration 19%
- Fundraising 5%

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# THE YEAR IN NUMBERS



**23,959** MAGAZINES

Delivered to individuals, educators, and non-profits



**9,581** VISITORS

Explored the *Museum on Main Street* exhibit



**1,323** BOOK LOVERS

Attended *Let's Talk About It* discussion events in 19 Oklahoma communities



**305,862** INDIVIDUALS SERVED

Community Grants totaling \$249,435 were awarded through 33 organizations. In addition, two Disaster Relief Grants were awarded totaling \$3,725 and three Partnership Grants were awarded totaling \$30,407.

Oklahoma Humanities is the state affiliate for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The NEH was established as a federal grant-making 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 2022 was **\$893,506.**

## IN MEMORY

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Marilyn L. Barton

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Susan H. Caldwell

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Richard Dayringer

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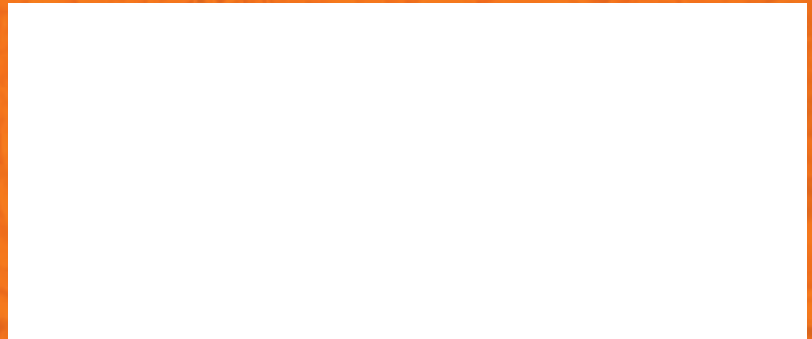


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**NEXT UP: GO! | SPRING/SUMMER 2024**

Where would humankind be without the impetus to GO? It's both an entrance and a departure. A personal choice and a demand of others. In our next issue, we'll embark on tales and travels of a woman at sea with her whaling husband, an enslaved man who shipped himself to freedom, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation whose trials and trails are marked by pecan groves. All this and more—no passport required. Let's GO!